Mary Midthorne

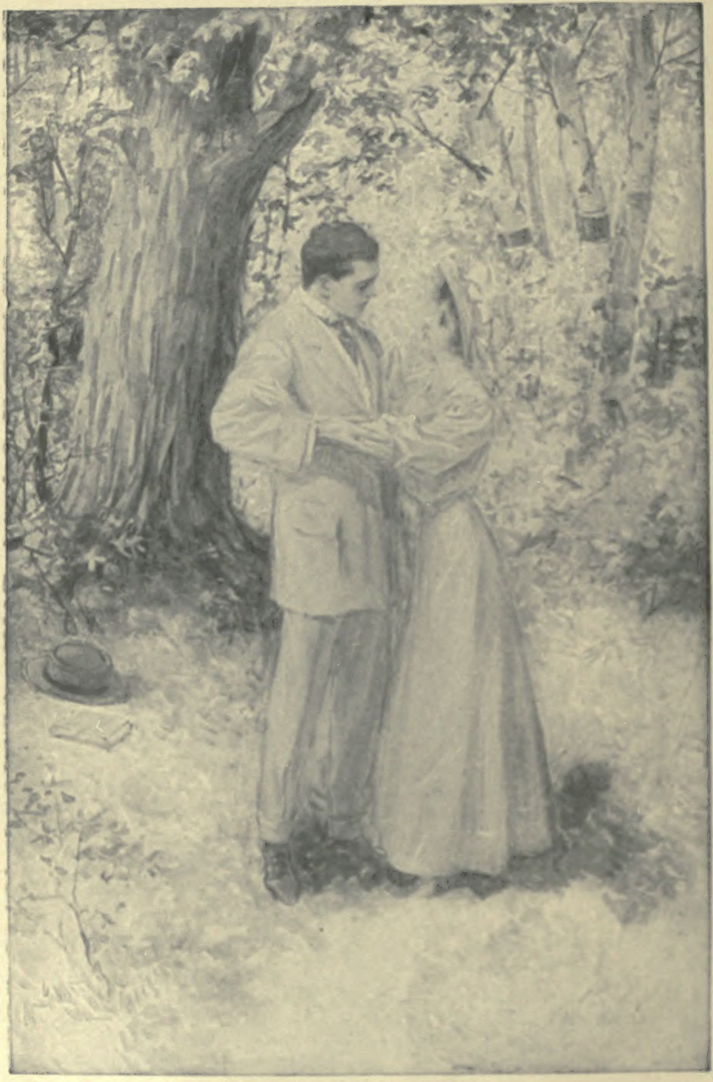
Copyright, 1911.
The Curtis Publishing Company

George Barr McCutcheon

MARY MIDTHORNE

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/marymidthorne00mccuuoft



"Listen, Joan, I—I ought not to hold you to your promise." (Page 222)

Mary Midthorne

BY

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

AUTHOR OF GRAUSTARK,
TRUXTON KING ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARTIN JUSTICE

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1911
By Dodd, Mead & Co.

Published, September, 1911

PS
3525
A187 M37

LIBRARY
MAY
19
1982
UNIVERSITY OF

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Children in the Giant's Castle	1
II	Part of the Truth Comes Out	17
III	Gall Broth	36
IV	The Entrance of Adam Carr	58
V	Seaward	76
VI	The Revealing of Several Instincts	93
VII	The Bending of Horace Blagden	114
VIII	When Friendship Ceases	134
IX	Tragedy	153
X	The Flight of Chetwynd Blagden	172
XI	The Shadows Fall	190
XII	Who Laughs at Love	209
XIII	Horace Writes a Letter	226
XIV	Let There Be Light	244
XV	The Prodigal Sister Returns	266
XVI	The Stone Wall	283
XVII	A Beggar Comes Knocking	306
XVIII	After the Sermon	327
XIX	Truths and Lies	347
XX	"On Information and Belief"	366
XXI	The Morning in Handy Street	388
XXII	Mr. Cooper's Busy Day	412
XXIII	The Cup is Full	429

CHAPTER I

CHILDREN IN THE GIANT'S CASTLE

THE children of the place had their own name for the severely grey brick house that stood at the top of the hill overlooking the town. They called it "The Giant's Castle." Not because it was inhabited by a creature of unusual stature or one of prodigious strength, but because childish fancy is so prone to identify visible aspects with those inspired by the imagination. The house, profoundly insistent in its dominance of the youthful vision, was not far removed from that which their tender intellects were pleased to consider a fitting abode for certain stupendous personages whose acquaintance they had made, as have all other children whose education has not been stunted by cross and unfeeling parents,— through the medium of fairy books and weary nurse maids' tales. Their small but vivid imaginations seized upon this prim and unusually peaceful abode as a perfect illustration of what an ogre's castle ought to be, and no amount of persuasion in the shape of realism could dull that impression until they outgrew the delights and fears of nursery literature.

The fact that two very small children lived in "The Giant's Castle," quite without fear of being devoured by the master thereof, militated not a whit against the juvenile fancy of Corinth-by-the-Sea, notwithstanding liberal playground and Sunday-school association.

The real occupants of the house were not taken into account. If they had been, there would have been no excuse for the name. It pleased the very young to imagine that there were other and more horrific creatures lurking behind the grey, weatherstained walls; it pleased them to believe that each of the square little windows in the cupola represented a peephole through which a ferocious giant peered in quest of the well-known English*mun*. And so, they lived in a delicious dread of the ogre and yet romped with the two small denizens about the yard and through the rooms — (when opportunity in the shape of an invitation to "come up and play" presented itself). All of which goes to prove that nursery tales are terrifying only when one has gone to bed and is left alone in the dark.

As a matter of fact, the people who lived in the big grey house, from master to servant, were as mortal as mortal could be. To be quite precise, the master himself was a very superior sort of mortal, in that he set himself up as an example for all other men to be patterned after. That so few of his gender succeeded in coming quite up to the standard was not so much a disappointment to him as it was a satisfaction to them.

Mr. Blagden was a most exemplary man. As to virtue and morality he *was* a giant. Yet, while he was respected, he was not feared. No one fears a truly good man. If the town in which Mr. Blagden lived had been a trifle larger than it actually was in the matter of population it is quite likely that he would not have been respected. But it was a small town, and the good are always respected in small towns. The paths are narrow there, and they are very straight. It is a simple process, you might say, to be moral and upright when the paths are so narrow that one is obliged to pursue a straight course or suffer the consequences of a bump against his neighbour's wall, which invariably is built close up to the path and has many eyes as well as ears.

When I say that everyone in Corinth-by-the-Sea respected Mr. Blagden, my assertion should be taken with a grain of salt. Respect has its degrees, and Corinth had its analysts. Down along the water-front there were drinking places, and in them were profane philosophers who maintained that Mr. Blagden was no better than other men, if one could get beneath his skin. Unexpectedly, of course. But, if you got beyond the drinking places, adjacent to which the paths were necessarily crooked and not at all restricted, you speedily would be set straight again as to Mr. Blagden's real standing in the community. The doubts were confined to certain unregenerate men called sailors, and everyone knows that a sailor sees nothing good in a landsman. He never has, and he never will. We may, therefore, take it for granted, despite the windy opinions of those vituperative seadogs, that Mr. Blagden deserved the high esteem in which he was held by the people of Corinth.

Besides, what is more to the point, the sailormen were not citizens of Corinth, but inhabitants of the Seamen's Home situated in the nearby village of Todville.

Todville was what you might describe as a suburb of Corinth. It pleased the Corinthians to speak of it as a suburb when abroad in the land. At home, in the bosom of the municipality, they failed to regard Todville in the same charitable light. Among themselves, they looked upon the village with considerable scorn and a great deal of aversion. It was like a growth upon the smooth, placid countenance of Corinth.

There may have been very excellent reason for this uncharitable attitude on the part of the smug citizens of Corinth. Todville was in the path of expansion. I do not mean to say that the village, which clung like a barnacle to the side of its big sister, was in any sense a restriction to the commercial or material growth of Corinth. Not at all. It stood in the way of civic pride, principally because it occupied the most picturesque spot of ground to be found anywhere along the coast for miles around. Inasmuch as it was within ten minutes' walk of the most fashionable and exclusive residence district of Corinth, and because it was in itself a mean and humble witness to the progress of the splendour it halted, Todville was a despised spot, though coveted. With Todville and its half hundred shanties out of the way, Corinth would have been able to spread its gathered plumes, and fly out from its crowded nest to settle down upon a new and coveted stretch of Earth, there to prink and pout with all the arrogance of a peacock, while the world passed by and envied.

But mean little Todville stood in the way. The charmed point that ran out into the sea, lofty and ironic, with its magnificent view up and down the coast, from whose heights one could stare in pity across and beyond the very summits of haughty Corinth,— the point, I say, was quite beyond the grasp of those who most desired its beauty. It belonged to a very close corporation of philanthropists to whom the comfort of antiquated sailormen was of more consequence than the consolation of ambitious dwellers in palaces.

Years before, when Corinth was not purse-proud and lordly, these kindly gentlemen established the Aged Seamen's Home on Lord's Point, a deed in perpetuity guaranteeing the dwellers therein against eviction. Unhappily for the present generations in Corinth, the heirs of the original promoters, with one or two exceptions, resided in New York, Boston or Philadelphia, and they, holding Corinth in some disdain, stubbornly refused to entertain a proposition to join in the effort to set aside the first grant, with the provision that the Home be transferred to another and less imposing section of the coast, some distance removed from Lord's Point.

And so it was that the Ancients remained almost under the nose,— or, more properly speaking, under the eye,— of Corinth-by-the-Sea, secure in their rights and far from clannish in their patronage. It was but a step down the beach-road from Todville to the water-front bar-rooms of Corinth. Like migratory ants, the Ancients swarmed down from the Point and straggled back again — physically unable to swarm — each paying his tithe to the municipality and taking away in turn a copious share of grog, from the effects of which he recovered with a matutinal fortitude that annoyed his more holy but less hardy neighbours.

Particular attention is drawn to Horace Blagden in view of the fact that his own grandfather was one of the prime movers in establishing the now obnoxious Home on Lord's Point. Moreover, Horace Blagden's home, the grey house on the hill, was so close to the line separating the Todville reservation from Corinth that he could have thrown a stone from his stable-yard well into the preserve, provided, of course, that he was in the habit of throwing stones. But Mr. Blagden never threw stones, either literally or figuratively. He was content to let other people do that, relying on his own aloofness to escape without bruises to himself.

No one could afford to throw stones at Mr. Blagden. He was the great man of Corinth.

After a single, ineffectual attempt on his own part to get possession of the Point for himself, he settled back and looked the other way. Thereafter, the town of Corinth did all of the talking, and voiced all of the resentment toward the lowly village of Todville, seated, as it were, almost under the gates of Nineveh.

The venerable sea-dogs from the Point, in their libations, spoke freely of Horace Blagden because they owed nothing to him since he had tried to take away from them that which his grandfather had given. They were quite alone in their privileges. It may be said, in explanation of this rather ambiguous remark, that nearly everyone else in Corinth owed something, in one way or another, to the expansive Mr. Blagden.

He was the president of the private banking house of Blagden & Co., besides being the head of such institutions as the Street Railway Company, the Short Coast Steamship Company, the Building and Loan Association, the Merchant's Protective Society, the Corinth Brick and Lime Works, the Country Club, the Town Board, and, last but by no means least, the Congregational Sunday School. I almost forgot to include the Greenvale Cemetery Association. Only the most violent politics kept him from ascending to the Presidency of the Seamen's Home Society.

I apprehend that no one who reads these lines will undertake to dispute my claim that Mr. Blagden was the most influential person in Corinth. I think I have established the proof in these brief sentences that he was a very superior sort of mortal, if, indeed, he was not a little more than that.

While Mr. Blagden was very powerful and very good, and very proud of it, he was not what one would call popular. He was not liked for the enemies he had made; although, if he had an enemy, he did not know it. Even the venerable sea-dogs were somewhat punctilious in this respect: they did all of their talking in the bar-rooms, and were as close as clams when they got outside, guarding against the remote possibility that he might, by chance, be in the slums collecting rents. They would not put it above him. Still, they fell with common accord into the habit of openly respecting Mr. Blagden, reserving their private opinions for public-houses. Mr. Blagden's bank cashed their pension vouchers without question and without charge.

I have said there were two small children in the so-called "Giant's Castle," and that the youngsters of the upper social circles enjoyed acquaintance with them. I might have said there were three, except that a strange respect for the fitness of things restrained me. It is necessary, however, to announce that there were three, brother, sister, and cousin, if that is not too involved. The brother and sister were the wards of Horace Blagden; their cousin was his son. The small folk of upper Corinth mentioned the Midthorne children in one breath, and Chetwynd Blagden in another. More often than otherwise, he was not mentioned at all. There was joyousness in the breath that they gave to the Midthorne children, and something akin to reluctance in that which they devoted to Chetwynd. If the playmates of Horace Blagden's son were slow to speak of him, I feel that I may be excused for having neglected to mention him in the same sentence with his cousins.

Chetwynd was older than they, by several years. As the only son of Horace Blagden, he may have been pardoned for the distinct air of superiority that he assumed, even as a very small boy. His attitude toward his cousins was patronising when it was not inimical.

He lorded it over them in the most high-handed fashion, and his teaching justified him in that particular. Perhaps it was not altogether his fault. Chetwynd might have been a better boy and a more generous one had he not been the only son and heir of Horace Blagden, the great man of Corinth. The perfectly obvious fact that other children loved his cousins caused him, in his envy, to set his small hand against them, as well. He was privileged to treat them, one and all, with the disdain his position recommended to him. Was not he the scion of a rich and highly respected family? Were not all other small creatures in Corinth but clods in his path? Above all, were not these cousins of his dependents on the bounty of his father, and barely tolerated as such? Why, then, was he not better than they, and why not infinitely above those undiscriminating infants who elected, in their ignorance, to love them? In a more sensitive soul than his, the truth would have smarted. But he was the son of the great man of Corinth and he knew not the law of equality. He chose to be the lord, whether they liked it or not.

No child asked permission of its mother to go up to Chetwynd's house; they asked to go up to the Midthornes'. Therein lies the distinction and also the difference.

This narrative will not deal at length with the children of "The Giant's Castle." It is the purpose of the narrator to make his hearers acquainted with the three of them while they were very tiny persons, and then to carry them over the years as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we may all come to know Horace Blagden and his wife better, besides getting something of an inward view of other people who attended them in the capacity of subjects.

First, let us locate Corinth-by-the-Sea. It is a place of some six thousand souls, three hours from Boston by rail, and not half so far as the crow flies. It is of no importance which direction one has to travel from Boston to reach the little seaport, north or south. Suffice it to say, it is an old town, and its first families of to-day were known by the same names two hundred years ago. It is a thriving place, after a slow and dignified fashion. There is a port there, where coast steamers call, and freighters put in; while from its little harbour a half hundred prosperous fishing boats fare forth in season to reap a harvest from the sea.

It is said that once there was a time when Corinth was without a Blagden, but the period was of short duration. It seems that Horace Blagden's great-grandfather went off to London to reside, taking with him his sons and daughters, his wife, his menservants and his maidservants, but not his asses. They remained in Corinth. In time the menservants and the maidservants returned, and then the wife. The War of the Revolution was over. She put the old house in order, and then came her husband and his sons and daughters, for none of them married in the land across the sea. Since then there has always been a Blagden in Corinth.

Generations of them accumulated the fortune and the prestige that served to make Horace Blagden, in his day, the great man of Corinth. More than this, he was a recognised force in the vast money centres of the land, for he was rich even unto the point of commanding respect among the richest. Blagden & Co., Bankers, 22 Blagden street, Corinth, was a powerful concern. It could lend money when times were so hard that other institutions trembled.

Horace Blagden, when he came out of Harvard, went into the bank with his father. Then he set out, not unlike the princes of old, to find him a wife from among the lordly of the land. He journeyed far and came at last to the walls of a city called Gotham. He stormed a castle there and rescued a beautiful maiden from the ogres whom nature had constituted her father and mother, just in time to keep them from delivering her over to the mercy of an English gentleman who owned a coronet and a ducal palace, and nothing else, except a ripping stud.

She was a Van Dykeman.

Then, out of a fashionable school for young ladies, came Horace Blagden's only sister, Mary. She came out prematurely, it may be added, to run away with and marry the gallant youth who afterward became the father of the two little Midthornes, cousins to Chetwynd and wards of their unhappy mother's brother.

It had always been easy sailing for Horace Blagden. He stepped into his father's shoes, so to speak, when the old gentleman vacated them, and became at once, when he was but little past thirty, the great man of Corinth. He had not married for love. On the other hand his sister had, because she possessed the power to love. Perhaps that is why Horace had such placid waters on which to sail, while Mary had forever the roar of breakers in her ears. Mary came to grief. She loved intensely — and once too often.

Briefly, let me explain how it came to pass that her children found themselves more or less securely established in the grey house on the hill, unloved but tolerated with a resignation that even they, small as they were, could not fail to appreciate.

Up to the time Eric, the boy, was five, and his sister, the new Mary, two, they lived with their parents in a thriving Georgia town, the home place of the father and his father before him. Old Mr. Blagden resented his daughter's marriage to the handsome, whilom Midthorne. The young man once had been a visitor in Corinth, coming from Harvard with college mates for the summer, and his carryings-on had quite thoroughly scandalised the staid, puritanical element in the town, although affording great delight and encouragement to the youth of the place. It is said that the spirit of emulation which thrived in Corinth long after he went his joyous way, following that first and only visit, was such that if it had been as vigorously directed in another cause might have produced nothing but saints among the young men of Corinth. But it took a different direction altogether. For a time it was feared that there would be no stopping the lads. They went a dreadful pace and seemed proud of it. Old Mr. Blagden took hold upon Horace in good time. He commanded him to have nothing in common with Phil Midthorne, proclaiming him to be an imp of perdition. The young men had been friends. Horace made the fatal mistake of snubbing the Georgian on the street one day, whereupon Midthorne, after demanding an explanation and getting it, proceeded to thrash his future brother-in-law. It is needless to say that Horace despised him from that day forth. If Mary Blagden was not easily managed by her father, Midthorne found the task by no means difficult. She was in love with him — as were all the girls in Corinth, for that matter,— and his belabouring of Horace increased rather than checked her interest.

She never got on well with her brother. He bullied her after a polite fashion, all his own, and, as she couldn't retaliate so politely, he had all the better of her. Midthorne, to his own intense amazement, fell desperately in love with the girl. But he had to thrash Horace, just the same. You can well imagine his gratification when he found, almost at once, that he went up considerably in the girl's estimation after that disgraceful encounter. She experienced a malicious delight in standing up for him against Horace, not only in public but in the bosom of her own family. She "ended up" by marrying the family bug-bear,— for that is what Midthorne grew to be,— and promptly abandoned Corinth forever. Horace never quite got it out of his head that she married Phil in order to annoy the family.

Be that as it may, they made a sorry failure of it, those Midthornes. Phil was not heavily endowed with this world's goods, nor was he likely to acquire anything. He was a good fellow, a favourite, and it was his secret belief that the world owed a living to all good fellows.

Together they lived rather a thriftless life in the Georgia town, neither of them caring much whence sustenance came, just so long as it came. His people were poor. He had but little help from them. Mary's were rich, but she would not have accepted aid from them if she had been starving. Be it recorded, to Phil's credit, he would no more have taken from them than she.

She was the kind of woman who thrives on the attention of other men. There was a-plenty of them in their wide circle of friends who were ready and willing to give it to her, for she was beautiful, she was gay, she was witty. It was not long before gossip attached itself to her. Soon after the second child was born, Mary Midthorne began to chafe restlessly under the restraint of a quiet home life in the Southern town.

Phil had grown tiresome, commonplace in the extreme. He was no longer the dashing beau of her ante-nuptial days. Instead, he was slowly drifting into a disgusting state of complacency,— and complacency was the one condition that Mary despised more than all others. He loved his home and his children; he was getting over his love for the world. They quarrelled less than had been their wont. He was getting so that he would not even take the trouble to quarrel with her over the attention other men paid her — with her permission. She went farther and farther in a spirit of defiance to him — and his complacency. She got over her love for him, but it was like gall and wormwood to feel that he did not love her,— at least, in the old, impassioned way. She was still young, still pretty, still worth while: she could feel.

One day Phil found her lunching with a man he had particularly advised her to avoid, as there had already been talk about them. He upbraided her, in the presence of the man. That night she did not come home. He followed her to New Orleans, and from that city to Pass Christian. Out on the famous Shell Road he came upon her and the man.

He took her to the county seat with him, but he left the man lying by the roadside, a bullet through his heart. The unwritten law! He was discharged by a chivalrous Mississippi jury, and journeyed amiably back to his home and his babies, but without the wife and mother. It was a part of his unwritten law that she should keep to the path she had chosen.

Of course, in this grave emergency, Horace Blagden and his father might have been expected to come forward with a helping hand outstretched to the wayward outcast. But not they! They were of Corinth and they were great men and impeccable. They closed their hearts and their hands against her. She wore a scarlet letter.

Mary was not of the kind that goes to the gutter. The gutter is not a comfortable abiding place, nor is it one of luxury. She liked comfort and luxury. She went to Paris instead. Two years after the tragedy on the Shell Road she came to a sudden and perhaps timely end through an attack of fever while acting in the capacity of governess in the home of a wealthy expatriated New Yorker, whose wife, for reasons never made public, became estranged from him after Mary had been in the family a spare three months.

A strange coincidence followed. Philip Midthorne died of pneumonia in less than a month after his wife's demise.

Within a year thereafter Horace Blagden, now the great man of Corinth, since the passing away of his father, arose to the highest known point in Blagden generosity. He journeyed south with his wife and laid claim to the Midthorne infants, proffering a home, and an education, and other advantages which their paternal grandparents could ill efford to spurn. The children were allowed to come north, to the grey house on the hill, to the chill winds of Corinth, so unlike the soft, balmy airs of their birthplace, so far removed from the warm, lazy love of those gentle Midthornes. From flower-covered, ruin-racked mansion under a blue sky, to bare, grim, solidly prosperous walls under a sky that was always white.

Corinth paused aghast. Horace had done the one thing that no one believed him capable of doing. He had taken into his own home, to his own prim New England hearth, the offspring of the despised Magdalen and her red-handed husband. The children of an adulteress! The children of a murderer!

Horace Blagden kept his own counsel. He offered no explanation, no excuse for his surprising act. He was legally appointed guardian of the little ones; he set them down, with a grim sense of his own power, among the unblemished children of Corinth, and all Corinth was quiescent. No mother lifted up her voice against the affront, no father protested. They accepted the little Midthornes, and were amazed in themselves.

A word in explanation of Horace's act. It was discovered, on the reading of old Mr. Blagden's will, that he had not quite forgotten his lovely, though erring daughter. There was a clause bequeathing one hundred thousand dollars to each of her children, the money to go to them when they had attained the age of twenty-one, the bequest, in the interim, to be under the control of a guardian appointed by the court. It was upon the discovery of this unexpected clause that Horace Blagden set about, with some haste, to have himself appointed guardian. It also occurred to him that it would be the part of wisdom for him to attend to the bringing up of his wards, under his own eye and guidance.

And so it was that the two little Midthornes came to the grey house on the hill, where the hearts were cold and bitter, and where the ways were hard.

When they came, blinking and wide-eyed, they found their cousin, Chetwynd, there. He was four years older than Eric. Age was not his only asset in superiority, you may be sure. From the beginning, Chetwynd looked upon his unlucky cousins as interlopers, as dependents, far beneath him in every respect. It was necessary for him to pummel Eric roundly on the second day after his arrival. Eric, small as he was, openly had resented the larger boy's airs, being a manly little chap with fire in his blood. For this, he was kept locked in a dark closet for three hours. I mean Eric, of course. When Chetwynd told his mother that he had thrashed his cousin, that excellent disciplinarian promptly proceeded to punish Eric, so that it would not happen again.

The little warm-hearted Midthornes made friends quickly among the children in the set affected by the Blagdens. They were not permitted to go outside this circle. After the first few weeks of uncertainty in their new surroundings, they rose to their own level of joyousness. Not even the overbearing attitude of Chetwynd could chill this natural warmth of manner; nor the stern, lean face of their Uncle Horace; nor the amplified repugnance of their Aunt Rena. They were happy because they knew not how to be otherwise.

This was when they were six and three. They had no ideals. They had nothing black to remember, for they only knew that their father and mother had gone away for a long time. They knew nothing of Cain and Magdalen.

But they were to know before they were many years older.

CHAPTER II

PART OF THE TRUTH COMES OUT

Eric was twelve years old when his aunt, in a fit of annoyance, brought on by his throwing a stone at the fleeing tormentor, Chetwynd, told him that his father was a murderer, and that he was likely to become one himself unless he mended his ways.

It was the first he knew of that tragic episode in the life of his blithe father. The blow was so crushing that he was a long time in coming to the full realisation of its force. He slunk off, dazed, bewildered, frightened. Chetwynd's taunting laugh pursued him as he made his way blindly through the yard to the street below.

That was but the beginning. They had held it back as long as it was in their natures to do so. The great wonder lies in the fact that they refrained at all. Little Mary was not slow to observe the sudden change in her brother. A curious depression, an unaccountable sullenness in his manner puzzled her. Young as she was, she knew that there was something in his mind which he would not reveal to her.

He was but twelve. He possessed not the power of initiative in so grave, so stupendous a problem as the one which confronted him. He could not bring himself to ask the terrible questions. There was no one to whom he could go. It came over him suddenly that he was deprived of all that was good and noble and decent in the world. In his small, groping mind, he wondered if all the children with whom he played knew of the great secret, if all of them knew that his father had killed a man. With furtive eye and a new purpose, he watched their faces for signs betraying the slightest sense of aversion toward him. He waited in a great, hungry suspense for his aunt to repeat her tirade. He waited for fresh taunts from Chetwynd — he even invited them, with a subtleness surprising in one so young.

But they were frightened, they were wary. Mrs. Blagden, in her haste, had spoken without consulting the master. Horace had told her often that when the proper time came, in his opinion, he would tell the children the story of their misguided parents. She realised that she had gone far beyond her rights in robbing him of the privilege.

She was not sorry for Eric. The haunting, ever alert question in the boy's dark eyes made no impression on her. She had lived too long in the grey house on the hill for that. Besides, he *had* thrown a stone at Chetwynd. And more than that, the boys who came up to play *always* asked for Eric, not Chetwynd. She could not understand it in them. She secretly resented the preference.

Several days after her unfortunate slip, she went to her pastor for advice. She had not slept well. She was afraid that Eric might go to his uncle for the truth. The Rev. Dr. Presbrey, of the First Congregational Church of Corinth, was a good man, an immaculate Christian, a traveller who had not even glanced beyond the confines of the narrow path. He had lived in Corinth for fifty years, since the day of his birth, and once had done something notable in the general Council at Boston, which, however, had not been of sufficient moment to abstract him from Corinth.

He listened to Mrs. Blagden's confession, then called in his wife for a three-sided consultation in which the clerical pair agreed to everything advanced by their best-paying parishioner; and later on, proposed that she give him until the next Thursday evening to consider the case.

After inviting the minister and his wife to dine with her on the coming Thursday, Mrs. Blagden felt somewhat easier in her mind. She felt, somehow, that God would step into the breach. To the best of her recollection He had never failed her — that is to say, He had not failed her since she came to Corinth. Sometimes she looked back upon her dancing days in New York, and wondered if they were real. They must have been, for she had succeeded in getting Horace's consent to let Chetwynd attend dancing school. It was for the sole purpose, I believe, of making him graceful.

The old seaman who kept the upper-road gate to the grounds belonging to the Home on the Point was Eric's particular friend and crony. The ancient was rather chary about letting children inside the grounds unless accompanied by parents or nurses. He had grown, however, to like the manly, straightforward little Midthorne boy and his pretty, baby-faced sister. They were always welcome. Other children hooted at him when he refused them admission. Eric had said to him once, on being turned away:

"I'm sorry, Major. Perhaps if I come again some other day you'll let me in to watch the squirrels. Good day, sir."

There were three things in this very tactful speech that operated in Eric's favour. First, the politeness of it; second, the wistfulness of it; third, the grandeur of it. Jabez Carr had been a captain's mate, it is true, but he had never been by way of acquiring such a magnificent title as "Major." It occurred to him at once that the boy was not of Corinth. No Corinth lad would have called him a Major. He remembered that the Southland is full of Majors. It was not for a small boy to know that the sea does not produce Majors.

So Jabez said, relenting a bit: "You come from the South, don't you, sonny?"

"Yes, sir," said Eric. "I was born in Georgia."

"I thought so," said Jabez.

"I am Mr. Blagden's nephew, and this is my sister Mary." Mary curtseyed to the old sailorman.

"I love squirrels," said she.

"Come around to-morrow," said Jabez genially.

"Thank you, Major," cried Eric.

"Thank you, Major," piped Mary.

That was the beginning of a friendship that grew to something akin to devotion. Jabez experienced a great deal of trouble at first in subduing a natural inclination to nautical expletives, harmless before the mast, but very much out of place in the presence of a young person in pinafores. He was surprised to find how readily his verbs submitted to the new influences, although he would have been surprised to have heard them described as verbs.

The two children stole away frequently after school hours, or during the protracted summer vacation, to pay sly visits to the delighted old mariner. He repaid them out of the stores of an unbounded imagination. His tales of the sea; his hair-raising encounters with pirates, cannibals, sharks and "h'ants"; his countless wrecks and rescues; his wonderful experiences in snatching beauteous young ladies (all of whom were of the nobility), from infamous buccaneers; his life in the very island that Robinson Crusoe had inhabited; his descents to the bottom of the sea in quest of Davy Jones;

his — but why go on? Jabez possessed an imagination far superior to mine. In fact, he never knew until then just how magnificent it was, and he was very greatly pleased with himself. He used to lie awake nights, "thinking up" lies for their delectation, and then he would have to remain unusually wide awake during the daytime to avoid contradictions. Eric had caught him up sharply in one or two of his earlier lapses, and he experienced a sense of deep humiliation on finding himself so defective.

His gravest slip was in regard to an almost simultaneous action under Lord Nelson at Trafalgar and Admiral Farragut at Mobile. He was at once forced into a deep wonder and an uneasy respect for Eric's knowledge of history. Moreover, he was one day confounded by the boy's damning declaration that he must be nearly two hundred years old to have engaged in all of the transactions mentioned.

It was to old Jabez that Eric went after waiting in vain for a renewal of Mrs. Blagden's attack on his father's honour. On the afternoon of the day that the minister and his wife were to dine with them, the boy decided to make specific inquiries of the old seaman.

He went about it nervously, but determinedly.

"Uncle Jabe," he began, after procuring the old man's pipe and tobacco from the shelf in the watchhouse, "did you know my mother?"

The word Major had been abandoned sometime before at Mr. Carr's request, and "Uncle Jabe" substituted. He said he liked it better; it wasn't so formal. Besides, he admitted, in a burst of truthfulness, he had never been more than a Captain's mate.

"Not personally, my lad," replied Jabez, between puffs. "Jest as everyone knowed her hereabouts. Kind of at a distance, you might say."

"Did you know my father?"

Jabez looked up quickly. He had never heard quite that note in the boy's voice before. It occurred to him, also, that Eric was paler than usual. The old man suddenly felt the need of a cautious reply. He did his best.

"Yes, sir, and he was a powerful fine chap, too. I used to see a great deal of him when he lived hereabouts."

"But he didn't live here, Uncle Jabe."

Jabez collected himself in four fierce puffs at his pipe. "To be sure he didn't," he corrected. "I was thinkin' of another feller. A feller named Briggs. Handsome chap as used to be second mate on the *Firefly*, a ship I —"

"Did my father kill a man?"

Of course, old Jabez knew the story of the ill-fated Midthornes. One could not live in Corinth or Todville and be out of touch with Blagden history. But it had not occurred to him that Eric might be ignorant of the tragedy in his own small life.

Jabez got up from the bench and violently hurled his cane at a squirrel that frisked nearby,— an unheard-of act of cruelty on the part of the keeper of the gate.

"Consarn them pests!" he growled as he shuffled over to recover the cane. The squirrel, in plain astonishment, paused after retreating a rod or two, and looked back at its former friend. Whereupon Jabez, hoping to gain time, hurled his cane once more. The third attempt required a most unnecessary and futile fling into the lower branches of a tree which might have been considered the private property of the perplexed quadruped. "Always pestering a feller, dang 'em. They're gettin' so dog-gone sassy lately that they jest set up and make faces at me. Did you see that little cuss turnin' up his nose at me? If I ever —"

"I want to know all about my father," interrupted Eric, a tense note in his young voice. "What did he do? Tell me. My aunt says he killed a man."

A bright thought struck the old man.

"Sure he did, and a danged brave thing it was, too. Didn't your aunt tell you how brave he was?"

"No. She said he murdered a man in cold blood."

Jabez said something under his breath and looked about him for another squirrel,— or perhaps it was the cat, for one with very sharp ears might have caught a reference to that animal in his muttered remark.

"Well, I'll be jiggered! Did she say that? She must be crazy. Why, it was done in a juel, fair and square. Everybody knows that."

"A jewel?"

"Yes, sir, a juel. They fit a juel. With swords, d'ye see — or maybe it was pistols. They fit like two Southern gentlemen always fight,— with weepins. Ain't you ever heerd about it? Well, well! I guess you was too young. Takes a mighty brave feller to fight a juel, sonny."

Eric's eyes began to glow; his lips trembled with the sudden gush of relief that swept through him.

"A duel, Uncle Jabe?" he cried. "A real duel?"

"A reg'lar juel, the kind you read about in books. I've seen many of 'em in my time. Brave fellers fightin' fer their lady loves. That's wot your pa was a doin',— fightin' fer his true lady love."

"For my mother?"

Jabez felt that he had come near to overdoing it. He acquiesced with haste.

"Of course. Who else?" he demanded.

"Why did Aunt Rena say he had murdered a man? It isn't murder if you kill a man in a duel. Everybody knows that."

"These 'ere Corinth folks ain't got no idea of chi*val*ery," explained Jabez warmly. "They ain't like you an' me. They are the narriest people on the face of the yearth. Wot does your aunt know about chi*val*ery? Nobody ever fought a juel fer her, did they? I sh'd say not! Did your Uncle Horace ever challenge anybody to pistols or cutlasses? No, sirree! It ain't in 'em. Course she'd think it was murder. S'posin' the other feller'd killed your pa? Wot then? S'posin' they'd both hit each other in a vital spot. Wot then? She'd call it a double murder. It shows how danged narry these Northerners are."

He had worked himself into a pretty state.

"You said you were from Maine," reminded Eric, his eyes dancing. It filled the old man's heart with joy to see the effect of his ruthless lying.

It was necessary for him to repudiate the state he loved so well.

"Who said I was born in Maine? Who, I ask? Me from Maine? Well, I guess not. I — I went to school in Maine for three years, but that's all. I was born in Virginny. Don't you ever say I —"

"Listen, Uncle Jabe," interrupted the boy eagerly. "Won't you tell me all about my father and the duel? What was it about? Who was the other man? Where was my mother when —"

"Stow that, now, my lad," cried Jabez Carr. "Don't ask so many questions. Why, shiver me, I'm no encyclopeedy. Jest wait a minute till I go over and shut that gate. Then I'll —"

"I'll do it," cried Eric, starting off eagerly.

But Jabez halted him with an exclamation in which dismay was barely disguised by gruffness. He needed a moment for reflection, and he needed an inspiration.

"Set down! I'll shut my own gate, sonny. Wot am I here for? Set down, I say."

It seemed to the impatient, quivering boy that the old man was unconscionably slow in performing the simple feat. Mr. Carr's brow was more deeply corrugated than ever as he shuffled back to the watch-house bench. At first he sought to change the topic of conversation, then he assumed anger at the boy's persistence. Eric's white, eager, quivering face distressed him. He realised, with a pain in his heart, that his little friend would not be denied. He was determined to know the truth, and the truth was the thing that poor old Jabez was striving to evade. Far back in his mind lay the conviction that one day the boy would know the wretched story, but now was not the time, nor was he the proper person to make the disclosure. It does not disturb my conscience, therefore, to commend the course taken by Jabez Carr. He lied nobly, with the best of intentions, and his sin, though sure to be found out, was worthy of a lasting place among the virtues.

To be sure, in his enthusiasm, he overdid it, but why hold that up against him? He made Philip Midthorne out to be a hero, the like of whom never walked through the most exalted tale of chivalry. His description of that well-imagined combat on the lonely duelling ground, and the circumstances that led up to it, merited distinction in the choicest yellow-back fiction of any age. I leave *his* story to your imagination. I have my own to tell. The effect it had on the boy is all that I care to record.

When the lengthy, involved and highly coloured narrative came to an end — which was when the old man reached a stage where he realised that he was beginning to contradict himself because he couldn't remember just what had gone before,— the boy was fairly squirming with excitement, and pride, and glory in his heroic father. Jabez left nothing to the imagination, albeit he uttered not a single word of the truth.

Later on, the old man watched his young friend scudding up the hill toward the gate in the rear wall surrounding the Blagden garden and stable-yard. He was very thoughtful, and he shook his grizzled head in deep perplexity.

"He'll find out the truth some day, poor lad," mused he, "and all my lyin' will go for naught. Mebby 'twould been better to have told him the truth. What a fine little chap he is."

Eric encountered Chetwynd in the grape arbour. The older boy was snugly ensconced in a remote nook, where he spent much of his leisure time reading, far from the questioning eyes of his parents, and quite out of view from any of the windows in the house itself. He chose this spot because it was secluded, and he denied either of his cousins the right to approach within twenty paces of his lair. Two or three severe kickings had convinced Eric that discretion was better than valour. He kept his distance thereafter, but down in his heart he cherished the hope that there would come a time when he would be big enough to drive the proud bully from his paradise. You may be sure that Chetwynd's nook was the shadiest, the coolest and altogether the most desirable in the garden. He chose it with considerable perception. It was there that ostensibly he pursued the course in reading his father had laid down for him. If you had approached cautiously from behind, you would have observed that a flashy, blood-stirring paper back " library " of the five and ten cent variety reposed atop the obscured pages of Virgil. Chetwynd managed, in some way, to read at least one of these demoralising pamphlets every day. His mind was soaked with the vicious performances of certain highwaymen, road-agents, detectives, and the more exalted but scarcely less approvable virtues of youthful heroes.

His doting parents would have been shocked beyond measure could they have known of this unexampled straying.

Eric usually gave the sacred spot a wide berth. To-day, full of exaltation, he boldly invaded the nook.

" Get out of this! " roared Chetwynd, scarcely believing his eyes. He lowered his feet from their perch on the trellis, and was almost prepared to rise from the small of his back, on which he was sitting.

The ugly scowl did not daunt the trespasser. He came up quite close to his cousin.

" You can kick me if you want to, but I mean to tell —" he began.

Chetwynd interrupted him with a mild oath. A moment later he was standing over the smaller boy, his arm drawn back threateningly.

" If you tell father what I've been reading, I'll break your neck," he hissed. He was pale, not with anger, but at the thought of the information going to his father.

"Oh, I'm not a tattle-tale," cried Eric. "You know better than that. You're a tell-tale yourself, but I'm not. You —"

"Don't you call me a tell-tale!"

"Well, you are. You tell on me to Aunt every time I do anything, and you tell her lots of times that I did the things that you did yourself, so's I'll get punished. She believes you, and I get it good and hard, too. But I never squeal on you. You know I don't."

"You don't dare to," proclaimed Chetwynd. "You know what I'd do to you."

"Why don't you pick on Johnny Metcalf or Roy Gray? You're afraid of 'em. They're as big as you are, and they'd just lick you —"

"I'll give you a smash in the eye, first thing you know," growled Chetwynd. Still his arm was withheld.

"Go on and do it! Go on!" cried the reckless Eric. "You're a coward, that's what you are. You won't fight fair. You know I can't lick you."

"For two cents, I'd —"

"I'll fight you with 'dornicks' at twenty paces," said Eric.

Chetwynd laughed derisively as he shoved the boy away from him.

"Next thing you'll be challenging me to a duel," he guffawed meaningly.

Eric was quivering with the news that was to be his justification.

"Aunt Rena said my father was a murderer," he gulped. "Well, it was a lie."

Chetwynd stared.

"I'm going to tell her you called her a liar," he said. "Then you'll catch *hell*."

"Oh, if Uncle Horace heard you use that word," cried Eric, forgetting his purpose in the delight of anticipation. "He'd tan you,— gee, but he'd tan you."

"I'd show him if he tried it," blustered Chetwynd. "I won't let any man lick me, I don't care who he is."

Eric returned to his original attack. "I don't care if you do tell Aunt Rena. She knows it ain't true. He killed his man in a duel, a fair and square duel. It was according to the code, all good and proper. She has no business saying it was a murder."

"Well, it *was* murder," cried Chetwynd angrily. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Eric went on, rashly. "I'd like to see what your father'd do if he had to fight a duel. He'd run, he'd back out. He wouldn't stand up to anybody with pistols. My father was a brave man. He met his man and —"

"Met him?" sneered Chetwynd, catching his breath. "Yes, he did! He met him in the dark and he shot him in the back. That's the kind of a man he was — and, darn you, that's just the kind of a man you'll be. Everybody says so. My father says it's in the blood."

"It's a lie! It's a lie!" screamed Eric.

Chetwynd threw discretion to the winds. He had been waiting for the opportunity to hurt this proud cousin, whom everyone else liked so well.

"And say, while you're talking about my mother, let's talk about yours. Do you know what she was? Say, do you? Do you know what she did? She was a bad woman. She was a woman like — well, you know what French Fanny is down in Fourth street, don't you? She keeps a house of ill-fame. Nobody speaks to her, do they? Ain't every girl in town warned against being the kind of woman she is? Well, Aunt

Mary was like French Fanny. She was a prostitute. She —"

Eric was upon him like a wildcat, pummelling, scratching and kicking. The attack was so sudden that the older boy fell back before it, shouting in mingled rage and dismay. The smaller boy, blinded by fury, struck wildly and without much effect, but Chetwynd would have fled from his attack if it had been possible. The trellis barred the way to escape. He was compelled to stand and defend. Fortune favoured him in an unexpected manner. Eric stumbled and fell to his knees. Before he could recover, the larger boy was upon him, bearing him to the ground.

Despite his most valiant efforts, Eric could not throw him off. He was forced to endure a vicious pummelling. His nose, his lips and an ear were soon bleeding. Tears of rage and chagrin ran down his cheeks. He was powerless, but his cousin was relentless.

Between blows, Chetwynd ground out the bitterest taunts he could invent. There was nothing too vile for him to apply to the father and the mother of his helpless victim.

"That's what she was!" he kept on repeating. "And that's what your sister will be, too. She'll go to the devil, just as Aunt Mary did. Shut your mouth, blame you! There! That'll shut it, I guess. And you'll be as dirty low as your father was, too. Everybody says so. They're just waiting to see when it crops out. I've heard 'em say so. They pray for you. Did you know that? They pray for you and Mary. They have Mr. Presbrey pray for you, too. He does it every Sunday. But you'll both go to the gutter. Prayers won't help, you can bet on that. You're going to shoot somebody in the back some day and Mary's going to be a — Ouch! Oh, you will, will you? Take that, and that! I guess father ought to know. He's your mother's brother. If he hasn't a good word for her, I'd like to know who has. But what does he say about her? Mother tells me all about it. She *don't* lie. She tells the truth."

He would have gone on until exhausted, perhaps, had not intervention occurred to release the panting, beaten boy. Little Mary had been attracted by sounds of the conflict. A glance had shown her the situation. She ran screaming to the house, alarming her aunt. Mrs. Blagden lost no time in going to the rescue of her son!

She separated them and dragged Eric to his feet, shaking him violently by the collar. Then she led him by the ear to the house, haranguing him every step of the way, while Chetwynd followed close behind bawling out triumphantly that Eric had called her a liar, and a thief, and a bad woman.

The victim was thrust unceremoniously into a dark closet, without being allowed to utter a word in his own defence.

"Your uncle shall attend to you when he comes home from the bank, young man," said Aunt Rena as she locked the door. Then she went downstairs and made the exasperating mistake of asking Chetwynd how badly the little ruffian had injured him. Her son flung himself from the room, much to her dismay. If she had been listening closely, she might have heard herself alluded to as a "darned old fool" by her precious offspring.

For three bleak, unhappy hours the small boy who is to become the hero of this narrative, remained in the darkened, windowless closet, from which there was no escape. He chafed for a long time under the rank injustice that put him there. His little heart was full of the bitterest hatred for these unfair inquisitors; his soul writhed in an agony of shame and humiliation, out of which sprung the ever-recurring hope that he might die there in his prison, if only to make his aunt feel that she had been the cause of his death. He was not old enough to be a philosopher; he could not see beyond the present indignity. There was no hope ahead, so far as he could see. His whole life seemed cramped and squeezed into this narrow, cruel hour or two of despair. He was crushed, but there was a dogged fury in his soul that would not be conquered. Chetwynd had reviled his mother. He could not get over that. He could not at once grasp the full force of the charges brought against her, but there was no doubt in his mind that French Fanny was the lowest of all God's creatures. To compare his dear, pretty mother to that dreadful woman was the ugliest thought that could come into his mind. And yet Chetwynd had said she was as bad as French Fanny. And he had said, too, that little Mary would grow up to be the same kind of woman. The poor boy threw himself on the floor of his cell, and wept bitter tears, sobbing himself into a slumber from which he was aroused by the faint sound of tapping at his door.

The scared, timid voice of his little sister came to him through the keyhole. He commanded her to go away, to leave him alone to die. Then they would all be sorry. Besides, he added, quick to recognise a peril that might befall her, she would get a good scolding or worse if their aunt caught her communicating with him. The little girl stood her ground for a few moments and then went away. He was better for her visit, however. He was not alone in the world and friendless, after all. Mary was his, and he belonged to her. He would live for her that he might in the end die for her.

It was then that his volatile, imaginative brain began to build romance out of his predicament. He imagined himself confined in a dungeon by unscrupulous conspirators, from whose clutches only the most heroic actions, the most glorious stratagems would serve to release him. In the midst of these exalted reflections, his aunt came to the door and unlocked it, bidding him to come forth to his supper. It was not a romantic way out of his difficulties, but it was a pleasing summons, after all. His vengeance could wait — till after supper, at least.

Mrs. Blagden uttered a short gasp of dismay on catching a glimpse of his dirty, blood-stained face.

"Go and wash your face at once," she commanded. "You are a perfect fright. Why can't you keep yourself clean like Chetwynd? Go at once and get that horrid blood off your face! Not a mouthful do you get until you are perfectly clean. Brush your clothes, too. Don't let your uncle see you looking like this. He would be shocked."

Here was fresh indignity, a new injustice. The boy looked squarely into his aunt's eyes for a moment, and she must have felt the unspoken reproach and amazement in his glance.

"I don't want any supper," said Eric surlily.

"Wash your face, do you hear me? Your uncle will attend to you later on. My goodness, to think that a child as young as you are should have it in his heart to shed blood, wantonly, cruelly, as you have done!"

Eric flared up. "Oh, it's not Chetty's blood. It's all my own."

"Your own? Why, you little rascal, you know you cut Chetwynd with your knife. He says so. There's a horrid cut on one of his legs. Where is your knife? Give it to me at once! Heaven knows what we are to do with you. You will kill somebody, mark my words."

To her surprise, Eric indulged in a broad, ecstatic grin. He was gratified to learn that one of his kicks had brought the blood from Chetwynd's lean shin.

"You wicked thing!" cried his aunt, aghast in the face of what she was pleased to regard as malevolent glee.

"He lied, Aunt Rena, if he said I pulled a knife on him," cried the boy hotly. "I never —"

"Chetwynd does not lie," she interrupted. "Make yourself presentable at once. Pastor Presbrey will speak to you after supper. Heaven knows that something must be done."

He and little Mary ate their supper in the pantry, while Chetwynd, nursing a throbbing shin-bone, sat beside the minister at table and talked of his afternoon with Virgil.

To illustrate the contrariness of human nature, the scion of the house of Blagden, down in his heart, envied his late adversary the joy of eating in the butler's pantry, while he was obliged to sit up and be agreeable to the sanctimonious toady in the long frock coat and immaculate cravat. That is to say, he envied him until the conversation of his elders drifted to the recalcitrant lad in the pantry. Then he was glad that he was there. Moreover, when the meal was over, and the clerical appetite satisfied for the time being, he announced to his mother that he was going to stay in the library and hear what Mr. Presbrey and his father had to say to Eric and Mary when they were haled up before them for the judgment that was to be passed upon them before they went to bed that night.

CHAPTER III

GALL BROTH

The Reverend Mr. Presbrey will bear watching as this tale progresses. Not in the common, accepted sense of the term, perhaps,— not as you might keep your eye on a chap who has been suspected of taking a purse, or even a drink,— but for the sake of a certain propinquity he creates for himself in relation to the affairs of other people.

It has been said that he was a very good man. It is quite true. He had no children. If you can imagine a man so good as all that, you may reach some sort of a conclusion as to Mr. Presbrey's spirituality. As a rule, ministers of the gospel surround themselves with more children than their means would appear to encourage, but there is so much satisfaction in having them that even impoverished clergymen can afford to be prodigal. They call them products of God and set them down in their profit and loss column as riches that gold cannot replace. You've got to give credit to the clergy for this, even though you don't consider it worth while to go to church and listen to their views on the rearing of your own offspring.

Mr. Presbrey rarely came closer to the present than the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, unless it were to tell his listeners that the drink evil is still a menace to society, and that hell, which seems to be of all times, is a very dreadful place. To these, and other profundities of quaint originality, he owed his exalted position in Corinth.

He looked with horror upon the cheery priests at St. Ann's Catholic church down the street: they took life too casually, and they smoked cigars, said he to himself. He drew his sombre skirts clear of the shouting Methodist who preached in the First M. E. church, and disdained the worthy gentleman who held forth in the Baptist sanctuary — where the steeple-bell was cracked because it failed to come through the Revolutionary War unscathed. The rather progressive pastor of the Second Congregational Church, a youngish man from the middle west, came in for no end of pity and commiseration. As for the Free Methodists, the Unitarians and the Episcopalians, they were beneath his notice. There was but one God, his God; but one church, his church; but one creed, his creed. Thank God, there are but few Presbreys left in the land!

I make no doubt he would have resented the imputation that he was narrow, that he was remote. He took a very broad view of himself, and he was satisfied with what he saw.

His wife was satisfied, as well, which was consoling. Next to his Maker, Mr. Presbrey worshipped his wife; next to Mr. Presbrey, she made room for God. It was what you might have called a close corporation, the Presbreys and God.

Just outside the little private fold were the Blagdens. After them, the congregation of the First Congregational Church of Corinth.

It already has been said that Mr. Presbrey employed himself in the pleasant occupation of developing other people's children. His wife, it may be added, also took a hand in such affairs. She had never cared to have children of her own. This, perhaps, was a fortunate thing for Mr. Presbrey's peace of mind. It would have been most distressing, even dismaying, if she *had* wanted them.

Again, I repeat, Mr. Presbrey was a very good man. He will bear watching.

He was tall, spare, fifty and ascetic. You could not have mistaken his long, thin, aquiline nose for the property of any but a saintly man, nor could his closely cropped side whiskers, extending below the lobes of the ears, have belonged to a less exalted personality. Sometimes we confuse our own less careful ministers with overly importunate lightning-rod agents or insurance solicitors,— once in awhile, to our sorrow, with book agents,— but we would not have taken Mr. Presbrey, by any conceivable chance, for anything but what he was. And yet, despite an outward appearance of rigid self-government and exactitude, he possessed a certain form of weakness that is apparent in most of us, no matter how strong-minded we pretend to be. He was not above listening to the advice and counsel of his wife. I betray a secret, of course, when I say that Mr. Presbrey first took his burthens to his wife, and then to God. I will not go so far as to say that if she had pooh-poohed them as trifles, he would not have included them in his prayers, but it is quite certain that he would have gone about it perfunctorily.

If Mrs. Presbrey had searched the world over for a mate, she could not have succeeded in finding one more compatible than he. I do not pretend to know how far afield she searched, nor how long it was before she came to him, but it is reasonable to suspect that she had made some endeavour. She was forty when he married her and she had led the Bible class in his Sunday school for at least ten years before the miracle came to pass.

Corinth was her birthplace, so, I fancy, she did not find it necessary to venture far from home.

She believed in the efficacy of prayer. That is why she received the belated blessing in the shape of Mr. Presbrey. For fifteen long years she had prayed with him — and for him. God's blessing, as well as his wrath, is often delayed beyond all understanding, but if we accept Mrs. Presbrey's spiritual persistency as an example, our minds may be at rest as to the virtue of the admonition: "Ask and ye shall receive."

It is only natural to suppose that the excellent Presbreys had gone into the problem of the Midthorne children quite thoroughly before presenting themselves at the house on the hill, some fifteen minutes prior to the Blagdens' dinner hour. Mrs. Presbrey made it a point never to be late for anything. She avoided all possibility of such an occurrence by being punctually ahead of time. So, when they sat down to table at seven o'clock, they were prepared to give all the Christian advice that the occasion and its exigencies demanded.

Mr. Presbrey looked askance at Chetwynd while the dessert was being served. It was what is commonly called "float." Mrs. Blagden, intercepting the look, directed a questioning glance at her husband. Horace looked at the crystal chandelier for a moment, and then said:

"Run along now, Chetwynd."

"I want some more float," said Chetwynd, who knew they were holding something back.

Mrs. Presbrey sighed. Then she asked, casually enough:

"Have your sister's children gone to bed?"

Horace cringed. He always cringed when they were spoken of as his sister's children. It never occurred to him that it would have sounded awkward if one asked: "How are Mr. Midthorne's children?" or "Are the late Mr. Midthorne's children coming to Sunday school?" The worst of it was, he could not deny that they were his sister's children.

"No, Mrs. Presbrey, they have not," he replied. He pondered for a moment. Then he passed his smooth, white hand across his chin. "That reminds me, I want to speak to you about them, Presbrey. The time has come — er — ahem! — when it seems advisable for us to acquaint them with the unhappy conditions surrounding their babyhood. They should not be allowed to grow up in utter ignorance of — er — ahem! — certain hereditary influences. They must be prepared, if it is in our power to prepare them, for the perils of that miserable heritage. We do not want them to go on unconsciously developing the — the — er,— what shall I say? — the faults of their parents."

Mr. Presbrey's blue eyes lighted up.

"My prayers are never complete without an earnest plea in behalf of those dear children," he said. If he had taken the trouble to look, he might have seen a certain tightening of the lines about Mrs. Blagden's lips. Mrs. Presbrey, more observing, saw the change in her hostess's expression. She hastened to apologise for the careless use of the adjective.

"All children are dears," she explained.

"'Suffer little children to come unto me'"— began Mr. Presbrey absently.

Chetwynd snickered. A warm red surged to the speaker's cheeks and brow, causing his wife to start with amazement. She had not known there was so much blood in him.

"What we *should* do," remarked Horace blandly, "is this: we should put the situation clearly to Eric. He is twelve years old and bright as a dollar. No one can gainsay that. I daresay Mary would not be sufficiently impressed at her present age. Perhaps we'd better wait in her case —"

"I thought you wanted to save both of 'em," put in Chetwynd rashly.

"Chetwynd!" exclaimed his father and mother in unison.

"There is a saying," added Mr. Presbrey, in whom resentment still rankled, "that children should be seen, or something to that effect." It was a very daring remark for him to make.

"Well, you have to take chances on hearing them if you suffer 'em to come unto you," said Chetwynd, secure in his domain.

"Chetwynd is so remarkably quickwitted, don't you think so, Mrs. Presbrey?" cried his mother admiringly. "That was a very smart rejoinder."

"Very," said Mrs. Presbrey, with unction.

"Chetwynd, you will oblige me by holding your tongue," said Mr. Blagden quite severely. When he spoke in that tone of voice, Chetwynd always subsided. "As I was saying, Presbrey, we may as well defer in the case of Mary, though God knows I do not want to run the risk of being too late."

"I fancy no harm can come to her for some years. She is nine, I believe," said Mr. Presbrey.

"Nine," said Mr. Blagden, "last April."

"Of course, the seed is there," mused the other.

"Of course," agreed three voices, almost in unison.

"Eric is developing very marked traits that — er, ahem! — You might say they are quite ominous," said

Mr. Blagden. "He has a temper and a tendency to let go of it without any effort at self-restraint. I regret to say that he has formed the habit of throwing stones at Chetwynd,— frequently, so my boy informs me, when his back is turned. That trait, believe me, is distinctly hereditary. It isn't necessary, I'm sure, for me to go into the private history of his father. Suffice it to say, he was a man of violent temper, with a disposition to — er, ahem! — to shed blood. I regret to add that the children's mother also took a lawless view of the proprieties. It is our duty to paint the picture as strongly, as vigorously as we can for Eric's sake. He must be made to see the handwriting on the wall. He must be warned in time. We may be able to check or divert the evil tendencies that accrue to him by nature."

"In other words," said Mr. Presbrey, "we must obstruct Nature. I quite understand, my dear Mr. Blagden."

"Precisely," agreed Horace.

"We should pray for the poor boy," began Mrs. Presbrey. Mr. Blagden held up his hand and shook his head, with a deprecatory smile. He was still vaguely conscious of a remote period in his life when his admiration for Julia Crowden rose almost to the importance of love. That was when he was fifteen and she was twenty-five. He was now forty-five, and she had been the wife of his pastor for fifteen years. He never looked at her without experiencing a sort of speculative wonder, very faint, very vague and plainly reminiscent.

"The time for prayer has passed," he protested. "We must use a little common sense now." He hastened to set himself aright: "Do not misunderstand me, Julia. So many of my prayers have been answered that I, least of all, should deny the efficacy of prayer.

I will say, however, that my prayers have always been supplemented by a certain amount of purely human endeavour." He was unconsciously humorous, despite his serious mien. "What I mean is this: We can't help Eric with prayer unless we are able to secure his co-operation. We can't obtain that without first telling him what it's all about. Do you get my meaning?"

"It is perfectly clear," said Mr. Presbrey, folding his napkin with grave precision, so that the initial "B" remained in view.

"Perfectly," his wife agreed.

"What would you suggest?" asked Mr. Blagden.

Mr. Presbrey was tactful. He levelled his gaze upon a huge Delft platter on the plate rail above Mrs. Blagden's prim coiffure, and pondered. He pondered long enough to permit his diplomacy to bring results. The effort was successful. Mr. Blagden offered the suggestion.

"I suppose we'd better have Eric in the library at once. Ring for Martha, please." He directed the request to his wife, who at once jangled the little silver hand-bell that stood beside the Warsaw candlestick. "Martha," said he, when the ancient domestic appeared in the door, "send Master Eric to the library at once."

So far as Horace was concerned, the conference was over. It was now time for action.

"Eric's gone to bed, sir," announced Martha.

"It isn't his bedtime," said Mrs. Blagden sternly.

"No, ma'am, but he said his face was hurting him so."

"His face?" demanded Mr. Blagden, who had not heard of the encounter in the arbour.

"He said he fell off the fence and bruised it, sir," said Martha, who would not have repeated a lie for the world.

Mrs. Blagden cleared her throat uneasily. Her first impulse was to remain silent, but, on second thoughts, she saw a chance to discredit the boy in the eyes of his uncle. She knew that Horace detested a lie.

"Fell off the fence?" she exclaimed. "He did nothing of the sort. He attacked Chetwynd, who was compelled to thrash him soundly. Now, why should he tell such a lie as that?"

Mr. Blagden possessed a sense of justice. "You are much larger than Eric, Chetwynd," he said, turning a bit red in the face.

"He threw a brick at me. I punched him in self-defence," said his son, after a scowl of amazement at his mother.

"You may go, Martha," said Mr. Blagden, for once a bit confounded. "But stay. If he isn't asleep, tell him to get up and come down at once."

"Pound hard on the door before you ask him if he's asleep," advised the resourceful Chetwynd.

"Let us retire to the library," said his father, arising.

"Say," said Chetwynd, "if you think Mary is too young to know things, you're off your base."

"My son, I'm sorry to hear you use such an expression. Off my base? What do you mean, sir?"

"She's onto things all right," announced the boy eagerly. "She knows a good deal more than you think she does. You ought to hear some of the words she uses."

"Incredible," cried Mr. Presbrey, plainly distressed, and without knowing what words she had used.

Horace studied the figures in the carpet for a moment. "You may ask —" but Martha had departed. "Ring the bell, please, my dear."

The bell was jangled once more and Martha came into the room, somewhat out of breath.

"I hadn't got half way upstairs, ma'am," she announced rather sharply.

"You may bring Mary downstairs also, Martha," ordered Mrs. Blagden.

Fifteen minutes passed before Eric and Mary, very wide awake and curious, presented themselves in the library. Eric, while dressing, had given himself up to reckless speculation as to the cause of the summons. On the way downstairs, he confided his conclusions to the mystified Mary. His eyes glittered with the joyous hope that lurked in his soul.

"I'll bet they're going to send us off to boarding school," he whispered. She gave an ecstatic gasp, and clutched at his arm.

"Oh, Eric, do you *really* think so? Oh, it can't be true!"

"Well, it's something," he argued excitedly. "It must be important, or they wouldn't be getting us out of bed."

Mary was of faint heart. She pulled a wry face. And Mary's dark, flower-like face was of an exquisite modelling that could not be wrought into anything unpleasant to the eye, no matter how hard she tried. Her very worst "faces" were fascinating. You would have loved every inch of her, believe me.

"'Tisn't boarding-school," she declared. "That could wait till breakfast-time. It's something else. Mr. Presbrey's still there."

Eric pondered. "I'll bet it's about you and me skipping Sunday school two weeks ago,— the day of the fire down in Front street."

"Maybe someone's left us a fortune," whispered she, just as he was about to turn the knob of the library door. "Oh, my! What if someone has!"

Eric's "Gee" was a great potential declaration of resolve.

The Blagden library, like all other rooms in the big house, was stiffly respectable. The rows of books, in the original cloth bindings, covered the wall space on four sides of the room from floor to ceiling. The glass door of each section was locked, and Mr. Blagden carried the key in his trousers' pocket. The only portion of the volumes accessible to the reader was the title stamped on the back. Dust was not the only thing that was denied access to the shelves. Most of the volumes were first editions and uncut, and they possessed a value that was not to be disturbed by the ordinary mind. Sometimes Mr. Blagden himself looked into them, but to no one else was this privilege extended. There was no book there, you may be sure, that the most innocent boy or girl could not have read without contamination. They were a particularly clean lot of "items," to use the professional term.

Once, by mistake, an English edition, in twelve volumes, of the Memoirs of Casanova joined the solemn and sedate company, quite without discussion for the simple reason that the master of the house had taken the books in part payment of a debt incurred by a real literary chap, who had been in college with him. The erotic Casanova remained there for many months, touching hides with a carefully bound set of Ruskin, before someone who knew came along to enlighten Mr. Blagden as to their salaciousness. The owner, aghast, would have cast the offending volumes into the fire had not his friend advised him that a good set of Casanova would bring something like a hundred dollars if the "right party" came along. So Mr. Blagden kept them a year longer, waiting for the right party to come along. He sold them at last to the cashier in his bank, and ever afterward looked upon that gentleman as a person of perverted taste and not to be wholly trusted.

But I am diverging. The two Midthornes, on entering the room, paused irresolute just inside the door, gazing in no little dismay upon the four stern-visaged persons ranged about the long library table. Chetwynd had partially effaced himself by sitting upon the small of his back in the great arm chair in the corner.

"Close the door, Eric," said his uncle. "Now, come here. You, too, Mary." The children approached timorously. "Let me see your lip. You tumbled off the fence?"

Eric fell into the trap. "Yes, sir," he replied.

There was a moment of silence, while four pairs of condemning eyes transfixed the boy.

"Eric, it is wrong to tell fibs," said his aunt, in hurt tones.

The boy saw his mistake. He felt a hot, furious wave of humiliation shoot by his throat and up to his brain.

"It isn't a fib," he cried stoutly. "I did fall off the fence last week."

"You were attempting to deceive us," declared his uncle, fastening his cold grey eyes upon the boy's face. "It is quite as bad as lying. Why could you not have told the truth, and said that Chetwynd struck you?"

"Because I'd sooner lie than tell tales," declared Eric boldly. "My mother used to punish me if I came in crying and told her some boy had hit me and father always said I ought to be a man and fight back instead of —"

"That will do, that will do," interrupted Mr. Blagden in some haste. Mr. Presbrey coughed, with a delicate regard for the feelings of his unfortunate friends.

"Poor boy, poor boy," he sighed. "As the twig is bent!"

"Er — ahem! Your aunt and I have come to the conclusion, children, that it is high time you were brought to a realisation of what is before you. It is not a pleasant task, my lad,— not a pleasant task."

"Far from it," said Mr. Presbrey.

"Sit here on the sofa, both of you. That's right. Now, please do not interrupt — er — ahem! Remember it is for your own good."

The children sat rigidly upright on the edge of the old damask sofa, facing the four persons who looked across the long table at them. The lights in the chandelier were burning. Mary glanced up at them with a vague sense of wonder. She had never seen them lighted before. It was always the kerosene student's lamp on the end of the table, beside Mr. Blagden's chair. There was a marked absence of the dim religious light in the room to-night.

"Don't cross your legs, Mary," said her aunt severely. "How many times have I told you —"

"Yes, ma'am," gasped Mary, uncrossing her plump little legs in a hurry, and sending her quaint, apologetic smile up against the frozen faces opposite. The chill was transferred to her blithe little heart.

"Mr. Presbrey wants very much to talk to both of you," announced Mr. Blagden. "I am sure you will receive what he is about to say in good grace and humility. You know that he, as well as your aunt and I, has the welfare of your souls at heart. He is about to tell you of your father, and the dreadful story of your unhappy mother. Now, please pay strict attention to his words. You will find comfort and solace in the promises he will hold out to you afterwards. There is a great light beyond the breakers — er — ahem! — over which you must be cast before the darkness of the night is lifted for you. He will, with God's blessing, direct you into paths which lead away from the pits into which your unfortunate parents drifted in their wilfulness. Will you be good enough, Mr. Presbrey, to — er — ahem!" He broke off the injunction — it was hardly a request — in the middle, and settled back with complacent confidence in his pastor's intuition.

The worthy pastor cleared his throat, and began. With his uncle's first words, Eric felt a sickening, horrid lump arising in his throat. Something seemed to tighten about his whole body, holding him in a grip so relentless that he could scarcely breathe. He sat there, staring wide-eyed and helpless, at the lean face of the man who was to say things he knew would hurt as nothing had ever hurt him before. Twice he swallowed hard, but the lump was there to stay. He heard the quick, bewildered catch in Mary's breathing. Without looking, he knew that her lip trembled. He knew that they were about to attack his father. He knew, instinctively, what charge would be brought against him,— and he had loved him so dearly, so fiercely. Words struggled to his lips.

"It was a duel," he managed to say, in a pitiful effort to anticipate pain.

Mr. Presbrey hesitated. He wondered who had given this version to the boy.

"Alas, my boy, you have been misinformed — er — I should say you have misconstrued the words of your informant," he said uneasily. It suddenly occurred to him that either Mr. or Mrs. Blagden, in a moment of weakness, might have told the boy that there *was* a duel; in that event, it was necessary for him to proceed with tact — with caution.

"Who told you that, Eric?" demanded his uncle and aunt simultaneously.

"It doesn't matter," supplied Mr. Presbrey indulgently, quite at ease once more. "It may have been that as a very small child he heard something to that effect, and his memory has retained it after a fashion. Quite likely, er — quite natural. Very frequently a word spoken in the presence of the merest babe finds lodgment in its immature brain and makes itself manifest strangely in after years. I knew of an instance —"

"Don't keep the child waiting, Arthur dear," put in his wife. "He seems so eager to hear about his father." She meant to be kind, I've no doubt.

Therefore, Mr. Presbrey, with the permission of the erring woman's brother, plunged into the history of Philip Midthorne and Mary Blagden, ordering his language in its simplest form so that his small listeners might read as they ran, so to speak. The whole ugly business, from start to finish, was laid bare for their benefit,— and their future glorification. The helpless little Midthornes heard him through to the end, sitting immovable on the edge of the sofa, never once lifting their dry, half-closed eyes from the carpet at their feet. They heard the beings they loved best of all in the world, albeit they had known them so briefly, characterised as creatures of iniquity, their sorry misdeeds held up to them as warning examples, very much as the hangman of old left his victim swinging by the roadside so that all who contemplated evil-doing might see and be guided into paths of rectitude.

I will not attempt to follow the good Mr. Presbrey's preamble, nor to repeat his saintly interruptions of himself that he might point out lights among the shadows when occasions suggested themselves. He dwelt with particular intensity on the devils that entered into and warped the nature of Philip Midthorne, transforming him into a common murderer when he might have been an honour and a credit to his people,— especially to those innocent, God-fearing connections in Corinth. At some length, he dwelt with the impulses that conquered the man, and pointed out to Eric the signs of them already appearing in him. Violent temper, lack of self-restraint, the desire to inflict bodily injury, ungovernable spells of fury, sullenness, secretiveness,— and so on and so on — against all of which he must steel himself unless he was determined to follow in the footsteps of his ill-fated father.

"You do not want to be a murderer, Eric," he said at one stage, bending his luminous blue eyes on the bent, downcast face of the boy. "You do not want to come to an end like his, my boy,— do you? Ah, I am sure you do not. And yet,— ah, me! I shudder to think of what may come to pass if you do not safeguard yourself. 'Come unto me and I will give you rest.' Let me be your guide, my boy; let me lead you into sweet, gentle fields where strife and bitterness are not to be encountered."

Mrs. Presbrey, carried away by the earnestness of her husband, cried out: "Oh, Eric, think twice,— always think twice!"

"Think of the great, good God, who —" began Mr. Presbrey, but Eric, who, all through the blighting recital had been trying to concentrate his mind on the admonition: "Honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long in the land," could control himself no longer.

"I wish I could kill you,— and you!" he cried from the bottom of his harassed soul, lifting his blood-red face to glare first at one and then at the other Presbrey.

There was a full minute of utter silence.

We must do Chetwynd justice. He was secretly wishing that, by some chance, Eric might have a fair-sized rock in his pocket, and also the coolness to heave it accurately.

"There, there!" murmured Mr. Presbrey, rather helplessly. This benign adjuration, with its expressive hand accompaniment, was meant for the distracted boy, but somehow it went farther. It was the means of checking the caustic reprimand that rose to the lips of each of the elder Blagdens, as well as putting his scandalised wife in her proper place before she could utter a word — which was something he had never been able to do before. "You must not give way to rage like that. You should try to govern, try to conquer the vicious impulse that is back of such outbursts. I am sorry,— very sorry, Eric,— to hear such words from your lips. Only ruffians and the besotted of our world utter such threats. Compose yourself. You *can* overcome these base thoughts if you will but try. Try, my boy, try. I —"

"Amen!" exclaimed his wife.

"Amen!" added Chetwynd from his chair in the corner. Mr. Presbrey turned a dark red. He was conscious of ridicule in the boy's dolorous iteration.

"Mr. Blagden,—" he began warmly.

"Chetwynd!" thundered the young man's father. "Leave the room!"

"What have I done?" whined Chetwynd, thoroughly frightened.

"Never mind, Mr. Blagden, I beseech you," cried Mr. Presbrey in haste, reconsidering an impulse. "I am sure Chetwynd spoke with sincerity in his heart. Do not chide him, I implore." Mr. Blagden shook his finger at Chetwynd, and the incident was closed. But in one of the undiscovered recesses of Mr. Presbrey's soul, a small, bitter thing took root, and from it, all unbeknownst to him, a most unchristian aversion to Chetwynd was to grow with amazing swiftness. Mr. Presbrey never had hated anyone or anything in all his life. But he was destined to know the feeling and to enjoy it.

He renewed his appeal to the boy on the sofa. You would have thought that Eric already stood in the shadow of the scaffold, so eloquently did the excellent gentleman plead for his regeneration. The boy, after his single outburst, shrank within himself, crushed, humiliated, trembling. Somehow, he knew now that old Jabez had lied to him, and that these horrid sentences contained the truth. The light went out of his soul, the warmth from his heart. A beautiful ideal was being shattered as he looked on, and he could offer no resistance to the demolition. It was all true. His father *was* a murderer. He *had* shot down a man without mercy, without fairness. There was nothing left for the boy to build on, nothing that could stand firmly enough for him to attach his dreams to — nothing

The minister was telling the truth. The minister could not lie. Old Jabez had lied. Old Jabez *could* lie, he recalled in a hazy fashion as he tried to prop up his hopes by putting the old seaman's word against that of the divine.

His face was white with the frost that had entered his blood. His eyes were burning, his soul was faint. Twice, even thrice, he looked to his uncle and aunt for succour, though he knew not why. Something told him beforehand that they would not come to his relief, that they had no desire to shield him from the truth,— aye, that they had brought it about for some inexplicable reason of their own. He did not feel the convulsive clutching of his sister's fingers; he was dead to everything except the steel that was slipping into his heart.

Once he heard Mrs. Presbrey say, as if from afar: "Don't you remember, Eric dear, the man who was hanged in Ridgely county last fall? Think of that! Think of that man's feelings!"

But he could not think of that man's feelings. He could only think of his own, of his sister's, of his father's. Why should she ask him to think of that man's feelings? What was that man to him, or to his sister? What had *he* to do with the case? *That* man had only killed his wife. He had not killed a scoundrel, as his father had done.

"Come to Christ! Come to Christ!" droned the gentle, persistent voice of the minister, punctuating his harangue with the earnest appeal from time to time.

Out of the maze Eric heard his uncle's voice:

"Do not hesitate on my account, Presbrey. Tell them of their mother."

In the middle of Mr. Presbrey's devout castigation of Horace Blagden's protagonistic sister, little Mary threw herself on Eric's shoulder and sobbed as if her heart would break. Eric's trembling voice broke in on her sobs, in the feeble effort to comfort her.

"Don't cry, Mamie, please don't! Listen! You never can be like that. You've got me. I'll stand by you. Nothing can ever happen to you." Then he turned fiercely upon his uncle: "Why do you let him say such things about your sister, Uncle Horace? She *was* your sister, my mother was. I'd kill a man, if I *was* a man, if he said such things about *my* sister!" As an after-clap, he added shrilly: "Even if they hung me for it!"

But Mr. Blagden retained the unruffled composure that made him the great man of Corinth. He felt of his watch fob,— mind you, he did not fumble it,— and gazed blandly at Mrs. Presbrey, a queer little smile of apology on his lips. As much as to say: "In my own house, dear me."

"I won't listen to any more," cried Eric, coming to his feet and facing them all. "I shan't stay here. Mary shan't, either. We'll go away to-night. I know where we can go. I —"

"Eric! Be quiet!" commanded his uncle. "And sit down."

"I don't care what happens to me," flared the boy, struggling with his tears. "What's the use? I'm — I'm fore-ordained, ain't I? Ain't we all fore-ordained? What good is it going to do to pray? Prayer won't help a fore-ordained boy, will it? It won't —" He was plunging recklessly, heedlessly into the deepest currents of his creed, inspired by a courage born of despair. It is the same spirit that urges on the wretch who is courting suicide. Mr. Presbrey cried out in horrified accents, checking the bitter flow of words:

"Stop! You do not know what you are saying. Listen to me, my boy."

"I won't listen! I'm forever damned, so what's the use. Let me out of here! Come on, Mary!"

He made a rush for the door, dragging his sister after him. Mr. Blagden leaped up from his chair and put himself between them and the door.

"You go back there at once, sir, and beg Mr. Presbrey's pardon," he hissed, grasping the boy by the arm. "What will he think of you? Where are your manners?"

Eric whirled and threw himself into a chair, burying his face in his arms, a great wail of anguish escaping his lips, to be followed an instant later by a rush of sobs.

Mr. Presbrey sprang to his feet, an exalted look in his face. He lifted his eyes and clasped his hands in the ecstasy of spiritual triumph.

"Glory be to God! Praise the Lord!" he cried in thrilling tones. "He is saved! He has seen the light! The spirit of evil is broken! Praise the Lord! Let us give thanks for the sign! Let us bow our heads in prayer."

He fell upon his knees beside the quivering boy and lifted his voice in prayer. The others stood with bowed heads, even Chetwynd being carried away by the rush of the conquerors. Little Mary, clinging to the doorknob, stood transfixed, gazing in helpless astonishment at the picture.

Later, the two children were led to their room by Mrs. Blagden herself, attended by the soulful Mrs. Presbrey.

"Go to sleep, you poor dears," said the former, tears of emotion in her voice. "You will feel better in the morning. It will all come right in the end. Try to believe all that Mr. Presbrey has said to you. He knows best. He will be your best friend."

Perhaps if Rena Blagden had never come to Corinth to live she would have been a different woman,— a gentler one.

" Mr. Presbrey will come to see you in the morning, children," said Mrs. Presbrey. " Keep a brave heart and put your trust in the Lord. He will give you strength." Then to Mrs. Blagden, as that lady gently closed the door on the children: " Don't you think you'd better lock the door, my dear? "

CHAPTER IV

THE ENTRANCE OF ADAM CARR

Mr. Presbrey came the next day and for many days thereafter with a regularity that deserved something more (I was about to say better) than the mere salvation of two small souls. Sometimes he got it, and sometimes he didn't. It all depended on what Mrs. Blagden had in the house.

In any event, he was sincere in the task unto which he had set himself. I am not trying to make Mr. Presbrey out a hypocrite. He was not that. He honestly, firmly believed that he was following the dictates of a Christian spirit in bedevilling the heart-sick boy with his words of advice, and caution, and consolation. At least, there was attached to his prerogative all the virtues to be found in good wool: it wore well and did not shine.

Eric, after the effects of that cruel night had washed themselves away in tears, rose manfully to the exigencies of his position. He turned to Mary, forgetting his own troubles in the resolve to lessen hers. She could not fail to respond to the strength and earnestness of his devotion. Young as she was, she recognised the spirit of unselfishness, the real heroism that moved him to think first of her, then of himself. She was never to forget the first few days following that wretched awakening. Somehow, it came to her that Eric was a grown man and a strong one, with the will and the power to stand between her and all adversity, all things cruel and unkind.

Together, they submitted to the importunities of the good pastor, enduring with a grace that had all the marks of a patient sullenness. They were temporarily broken; they had no power of initiative; they could not even nourish the resentment that strove so hard to grow in their ploughed, harrowed hearts. They listened numbly to the unceasing repetition of such sentences as these, coming not only from the Presbreys, but their uncle and aunt as well:

"It is all for the best, my dears."

"You will thank us some day."

"God is good. He will show you the way."

"A contrite heart, etc."

"You must not be allowed to follow in the footsteps of your unhappy father, Eric."

"We would not be doing our Christian duty if we failed to warn you against the impulses that wrecked your misguided mother."

"Your uncle knows best, Eric."

"Your aunt knows best, Mary."

"Mr. Presbrey knows best, children."

These, and other concomitants of woe.

Chetwynd's oft-repeated fling was this, with appropriate variations:

"You're a nice one to talk, you are."

The older boy never missed the opportunity to grill his wretched victim with scornful allusions to "the Midthorne courage," "the Midthorne honour," "the Midthorne virtue," "the Midthorne prospects."

Eric's half-hour with that unfortunate, though kindly prevaricator, Jabez Carr, was one that the old man was not likely to forget, even in his years of failing memory. The boy burst in upon him while the ignoble wounds in his heart were still festering, and his pathetic arraignment of the old seaman was the very essence of gall. He did not blame, but rather thanked the old man for his deliberate deception, and yet there was that in his words which compelled Jabez to look upon himself as the veriest blackguard unhung, the most misguided fool alive. For days thereafter, the bluff old fellow moped; and when he was not moping, he was cursing himself; and when he was not doing that he was cursing Horace Blagden. I will not attempt to enumerate the countless and varied devices practised by the old man to win back the confidence of his young friend, nor will I try to describe his alternating moods as these devices prospered or shrivelled. This much I will say: he became a very dull and uninteresting story-teller for the obvious reason that he maintained a strict and rigid adherence to the truth. His veracity was truly oppressive. The days of the pirates were over. In their stead were commonplace narratives in which he seldom performed anything more heroic than the swabbing of a deck, or, perhaps, an encounter with an obstinate pawnbroker. As time went on, the two children began to look upon him as a very tiresome and unprofitable person. Finally, one day, long after his regenerate period began, the anxious anticipation in Mary's starved soul burst its bonds, and she almost wailed:

"Uncle Jabe, why don't you tell us any more grand stories?"

"Because," said he, "it ain't right to tell lies."

"But how would we know they were lies?"

"You can allus tell when a feller's lyin', if you once ketch him in one," quoth he.

"Well, they are lots of fun, just the same," protested she. "Ain't they, Eric?"

"Yes," said Eric rather gravely, "if you tell 'em in fun."

"I'll tell 'em, all you like," said Jabez, his face brightening, "if you'll promise to believe they're lies."

"Then, how will we know when you're telling the truth?"

He pondered. After five puffs at his pipe, he said: "Well, if I begin by *sayin'* they're the God's truth, you can believe 'em. If I don't say that, you'll know they're lies."

And so it was that old Jabez came joyously into his own again.

This narrative, with your permission, kind reader, has little more to do with the Midthornes as small children. Suffice to say, they were more or less like other children in this respect: they could not remain young forever. They had to grow up. In passing, it may be stated that the sage counsel of old Jabez alone kept Eric from running away from the grey house on the hill, in those early days of shame and resentment.

"You can't afford to do that, sonny," he announced. "Jest put it right out of your head, once and for all. If you was alone in the world, I'd say skip. But you ain't. You got to look out for Mary. It's plumb foolish to talk about takin' her with you. That would be the quickest way to send her to the gutter. I know it goes against the grain to stay up there with them people, but it's a derned sight better'n starvin' to death on the streets. You jest stick it out. You wouldn't be so crool as to skip out and leave her there for them to pester and bulldoze. They'd put upon her terrible. They'd make a drudge of her, and worse'n that, maybe. You'd be a mortal coward to run off and leave her, and you jest can't take her with you. No, sirree, my boy! You stick it out. Stand by your guns. Just you wait a few years. I know what I'm talkin' about. You see, I run away when I was fifteen and went to sea. I wished a thousand times I hadn't, 'cause my step-father was nasty mean to my sisters and my mother."

He hesitated for a moment and then went on: "You wait a few years, and then you can tell 'em to go to hell." After a few reflective pulls at his pipe, he vouchsafed: "And, mind you, Eric, there *is* such a place as hell."

Eric, at sixteen, was as handsome a lad as you'd see in a week's journey. He was growing with a steadiness that promised a good six feet at man's estate, and he was as straight and as strong as a young sapling, and as lithe and graceful as an Indian. He excelled at all the games in which strength, agility and quick-wittedness were paramount. In baseball, football, skating, racing and sailing he was a leader because he was an adept; because, while fearless, he was never headstrong; while conscious of his natural superiority, he was not arrogant. It was not unusual for him to step aside to give a less accomplished friend the chance to carry off honours that might easily have been his. This trait did not go unrecognised, nor was it unappreciated by his companions. An extremely uncommon condition marked this attitude toward him on all occasions: instead of boasting of their own prowess, they freely admitted that "Eric Midthorne could do better than that if he half tried." Nor was there the faintest touch of jealousy or envy in their summing-up of his deeds.

The gentle, pleasant ways of the Southland were strong in him; he was prone to resent an affront with vigour, and as quick to repent. The hot blood in his veins was hard to control, but he always had the better of it. There was no indignity so grave that he could not deflect it without losing his temper entirely. He was afraid of the shadow that stalked beside him: the shadow he had inherited. If others knew the story of his antecedents, they were generous enough to keep the knowledge to themselves. In all the years he lived in Corinth, no one outside his own family, the Presbreys and old Jabez, spoke to him of his father and mother. He knew that they knew, and he was deeply sensible of their well-meant restraint. Their kindly reticence had a sting, however; there was no minute in his life that his pride was not being hurt by the knowledge that they were being *generous.*

He was in the high-school of Corinth, a leader in his classes as well as in the sports of the season. In two years he would enter Harvard. Mary, quite the prettiest girl in town, was his pride and joy, and constant care. She was gay, volatile, and deeply sensitive to the approach of slights and criticism, from which, when they came, she was quick to recover. She had him to lean upon, to look up to in case of trouble, and it is not surprising that the eternal feminine in her took advantage of that very stable support.

Chetwynd was in Harvard, where he was trying for the crew and the eleven, and for very little else. If Eric had entertained the hope that he might grow big enough and strong enough to "thrash" his bully of a cousin, he was likely to be disappointed. Chetwynd was a perfect young giant: he was the real and visible lord of "The Giant's Castle." There was no gainsaying that. To the surprise of everyone,— his father in particular,— the indolent boy developed into a rugged, towering mass of muscle and endurance. In his twentieth year, he stood well over six feet, and in his rowing togs tipped the beam at 180,— which seemed to be just what was wanted at Harvard.

Can you picture Chetwynd? Is not your imagination strong enough to see him in all his physical glory? Have you any doubts as to his attitude toward the lesser physiques of Corinth? Given, a boy who has had arrogance as a birthright, snobbishness as a product, and moral stealth as a necessity: add two years of athletic triumph at Harvard, and you have Chetwynd.

He went in for boxing and punching the bag. This was advised by his trainers. In college there were stalwarts who could maul him with impunity — and science, — because Chetwynd really lacked moral stamina, but when he got back home for the summer vacation or the holidays, he revelled in a perfect whirl of boxing-glove victories. It was never quite fair to hit Chetwynd hard, but it was an education to be slammed vigorously by this elegant expert.

"You've got to learn how to take it some time," was his usual response to their objections, "and the sooner the better. Be a man!"

Eric came in for some sound drubbings in the name of science. He was slighter and not so tall as his cousin, but he was gamer than the rest of the boys who "put on the gloves" with the magnificent Sophomore. While Eric knew little of boxing as it is taught, he could stand punishment for the sport of the game — and he could inflict it, too.

More often than not, Chetwynd was compelled to remind him, in the thick of combat, that if he couldn't box like a gentleman and not like a murderer, he would not "take him on" again. Whereupon Eric, considerably depressed and hurt, would lose much of his fierceness, and, as a result, received a lesson entirely satisfactory to Chetwynd.

"Oh, if I was only big enough!" the boy cried time and again to old Jabez, in announcing the result of his most recent contest.

"You'll grow, sonny," mused Jabez. "He's a coward at heart, and if you wasn't so derned sensitive you could put it all over him."

One day, toward the close of the summer vacation, Eric succeeded in drawing blood from Chetwynd's nose, and in the fusillade that followed, landed a blow which discoloured the big boy's eyes — a most ignominious illumination. Chetwynd, in wild rage, grappled with his lighter antagonist, and, hurling him to the ground, beat him unmercifully, all the time calling him a murderer's son,— and even worse.

Eric, as usual, carried his tale of woe to the old seaman. He was bitterly lamenting his unhappy position in the Blagden family, and the insults he was forced to endure, when a stranger appeared on the scene.

It was a warm September day, and they were sitting on the bench under the shade trees just inside the gates to the Park. Eric was nursing a bruised cheek and a twisted elbow. He had experienced some difficulty in evading his sister and Joan Bright, the one girl in Corinth who held an undisputed place in his loyal young heart. They were playing croquet on the lawn, and he, in shame-faced defeat, had been obliged to crawl over a back fence on leaving the cellar — (where the boxing contests took place),— in order to avoid a meeting and certain explanations. He would have given much to be able to stride before Joan Bright, a victor over the bully in whom, for reasons inexplicable to Eric, she professed to have a marked interest. Joan, by the way, was the daughter of Judge Bright, not quite fifteen and amazingly pretty.

But, I am on the point of digressing. It really doesn't matter about Joan at this particular juncture. She will come in later, very handily, I'm sure. It is only necessary to repeat that, by skilful dodging, he managed to skirt the lawn without coming face to face with the girls, and reached the friendly bench on which he and Jabez were found by the stranger I came so near to overlooking. Which would have been a deplorable oversight, as he is to have a most important part in the unravelling of this tale.

He was a stocky, well-put-up sort of man with a singularly hard and forbidding face, recently shaved; his cold grey eyes were set far back in his head and were shaded by straight, bushy brows of black. His mouth was wide and rather sinister in its expression. There was a suggestion of a smile in its corners, but not a smile of mirth; rather one of derision. Eric's first glimpse of him came when he happened to turn his eyes, as if urged by an impulse that was far from voluntary, in the direction of the watch-house by the gate. The stranger, in his shirt sleeves and smoking a short pipe, was leaning in the doorway, idly surveying the two on the bench. The boy stared for a moment, the words dying on his lips.

It was the first time he had seen a human being, other than old Jabez, about the little house. He was at once struck by the fact that the stranger was quite at home and on familiar terms with the gate-keeper.

Eric never knew why it was, but he suddenly found himself contrasting this hard-featured individual and the ascetic, pious-eyed tormentor of his soul, the excellent Mr. Presbrey. He was afterward to enjoy the humour of that ludicrous comparison.

"Oh," said old Jabez, with a start, "that's my son, Eric. He's stopping in town for a week or two, so's he can come over to spend his vacation with me. Adam, come here and shake hands with my young friend, Mr. Eric Midthorne."

The man came forward, extending his hand. A half-smile grew in his weather-beaten face.

"Glad to meet you," said he. His voice was hard and unmusical, but friendly.

"Thank you, sir," said Eric, as they shook hands. Adam Carr's hand was soft but firm. It was hardly what Eric expected. He looked like a man who had known nothing but hard labour.

"Father says you and he are great friends. It's very good of you to come and cheer him up as you do." His manner was tender, but his voice and eyes hard as flint, if the metaphor is permissible.

Old Jabez chuckled. "I reckon he gets something for his trouble, Adam. I fill his brain chuck full of hair-raisin' lies. He'd oughter make a grand novel writer, if he can jest remember all I tell him."

"You surely don't believe all my dad tells you, do you?" said Adam, removing his pipe to grin the better.

"No, sir," said Eric promptly. "He always tells us when they're not true."

"That's more than he ever did at home," said Adam, with a sly wink.

"Are you a sailor?" asked the boy.

"Not a regular sailor," said the other deliberately. "I've been a little of everything in my time. It don't pay to stick to any one thing too long. You get in a rut, and life's a poor job if you stay in the rut so long that you don't feel like making the effort to get out of it. Been in a scrap with somebody?" he asked, eyeing Eric's bruise.

"Just a friendly boxing match," said Eric, with a quick glance at Jabez.

"Feller much too big for him," remarked Jabez. "His cousin. A dirt mean college chap."

Adam's hard, mirthless smile returned. "Do you know much about boxing?" Eric confessed his ignorance of the finer points. "I'll give you a few instructions, if you'd like 'em," said Adam Carr, a strange light coming into his eyes. "I can show you a few things that will jolt this chap so's he won't get over the surprise for a week."

Eric jumped at the chance. "I'll borrow the gloves," he cried.

"All right," said Adam, sitting down and complacently relighting his pipe. "We'll begin to-morrow morning. I'll be here for a week. Can you come to my room in the Massasoit House?"

The next morning Eric appeared with the gloves. Every day for a week, he visited Adam Carr's room in the cheap water-front hotel. The man's skill with the gloves was a revelation to the boy. Chetwynd was the merest novice in comparison. Try as he would, Eric could not break through his guard, nor could he, in all his wild clumsiness, dispel the calm indifference that marked his manner. Adam was as light as a feather, and as quick as a cat, despite his stocky frame and phlegmatic bearing. Time and again, the boy would stop, panting, to grin sheepishly and bewail the fact that he could make no impression on his adversary.

"You're doing splendidly," said Adam, without so much as a quickening of the breath. "The main point is this: I can't hit you as easily as I did in the beginning. You're learning how to take care of yourself. You're managing to keep cool, and that's the chief thing in boxing. You are sidestepping and ducking very neatly,— something you couldn't do at all in the beginning. I don't wonder your cousin knocked your block off. Now, I'll begin to show you a few tricks at the game, a few punches. You won't learn 'em very thoroughly while I'm here, but you'll have 'em well enough to upset your cousin in good shape. There's one thing to guard against: don't let him rush in and clinch. He's too big and strong for you. He'd murder you in a wrestling match. Keep dancing away all the time. Get him rattled, get him mad."

Two days after Adam Carr's departure from Corinth, Eric, in the presence of half-a-dozen envious boys who had suffered ignominy at Chetwynd's hands, very effectually humiliated his big and raging cousin. He hit him at will, successfully evading the returns that were meant to lay him out, kept out of clinches, and cleverly outboxed the cock-of-the-walk. No greater insult could have been offered to Chetwynd than this. He returned to Cambridge fully a week earlier than he had intended, much to the surprise of his parents, who, somehow, rejoiced in a certain profound thoughtfulness that came over their son.

Eric was not a boaster. He took his triumph over Chetwynd with becoming grace. "It's nothing to brag about," he explained to his friends. "That's only once for me. Just think how many times he has whaled me." Nevertheless, he had come upon a new joy in living. His heart was lighter. His victory may have increased Chetwynd's hatred, but it also served to create a wholesome respect in that young gentleman's breast. There was something in that.

There was a dense atmosphere of mystery surrounding Adam Carr. Eric was unable to penetrate it, and he could obtain no light from the man's father. Old Jabez was resolutely non-committal. He would shake his head over Eric's eager questions, and answer evasively when driven to a corner.

"Now, don't pester me any more about Adam," he finally exploded, when Mary added her inquiries to those of her brother. "What business is it of yours what business he's in? It's an honest business, and it ain't prize-fighting, either."

"How did he learn so much about boxing?" demanded the persistent pupil.

Jabez glared. "From his father!" he roared. "I learned him all he knows about it."

"Oh, rats!" scoffed Eric, not at all impolitely.

"Oh, Uncle Jabe!" added Mary reproachfully.

"Do you mean to call me a liar?" gasped the ancient.

"No, indeed," cried both of them in a breath.

"Well, see that you don't," muttered he, very uncomfortable. "Adam's business is his business, just you bear that in mind."

They were not to see Adam Carr again for more than a year, nor were they to hear of him. He had sunk back into the void from which he emerged so unexpectedly on that warm September day.

With Adam temporarily out of the way, we can devote our time and attention to an infinitely more attractive creature — Joan Bright. Joan was an only child. As a rule, an only child is not popular outside his or her immediate family. Somehow, we have a prejudice against an "only child." I daresay the grudge is atmospheric, and comes from the fact that we ourselves have never enjoyed the exclusive privilege of being an only child. With Joan Bright, this phase of antagonism did not hold good: she was adored by everyone. No one thought of criticising her for being a petted, indulged "only child." It really wasn't because she was the daughter of a very distinguished gentleman, the Honourable Oswald Bright of Upper Corinth and the Commonwealth at large. Not at all. A great many people did not like Judge Bright, even though they respected him. He had made a multitude of enemies by administering justice as it is meant to be administered. You should not be asked to like a judge who has ruled against you. But you would have liked Joan, you would have adored her. Everyone else did, and you could not possibly have been an exception.

Judge Bright — sometimes called "His Honour Bright"— was no longer involved in the adjudication of local disputes. He had gone beyond that some years ago. To-day he was one of the justices in the Supreme Court of the State, and there was some talk, — in Corinth, at least,— of a seat on the United States Supreme bench when he had become too old for active service in his present capacity. But that is neither here nor there. His *home* was in Corinth.

They called the hill part of the town Upper Corinth in these days, for social as well as geological reasons. If you lived above Twelfth street you were of Upper Corinth. Your business would have to be below Twelfth street. No one but landscape gardeners and architects did business above. (It was before the day of chauffeurs and vacuum cleaners.)

Joan, whose mother died when the girl was six, was the particular and devoted friend of Mary Midthorne, although nearly two years her senior. Two more lovely, loveable girls could not well be imagined, much less created. Both were fair to look upon, slim, proud, aristocratic, yet simple-hearted and unspoiled. They were dark-eyed — but why describe them now? They are half-grown children, mere prophecies of womanhood. We can only say that they were adorably pretty, and pray that they may not out-grow their charms, as so many do. If they are as lovely when they grow up,— as they will long before this tale is ended,— it may be worth while for me to describe them and for you to contemplate them without reference to the old saying which condemns a fair child to unattractive maturity.

Joan was shy. Few pretty girls are shy. They may be bashful but not shy. There is quite a distinction. Joan was not bashful, which is the same thing as saying she was not clumsy or awkward. She was perfectly sure of herself, possessed a certain amount of poise, and had an air. You may ask, then, why she is depicted as shy. Why is the pet deer that feeds complacently from your hand shy? Not because it is afraid of you. You wouldn't speak of a cow as a shy creature. The deer is shy because it is high-strung, delicate, sensitive. Well, Joan was like the deer.

She was the apple of her father's eye. She held his heart-strings in those slender fingers of hers, and she drew them so gently that he never suspected he was being led whither she willed. He quite approved of her friendship for the Midthorne children, although he was in full possession of their lamentable history. As a matter of fact, Horace Blagden's appointment as guardian of the children had been made in Judge Bright's court before his ascendency to the Supreme bench. He not only knew the history of the children but he sympathised with them. He had been very fond of Mary Blagden, and he had liked Phil Midthorne. But, what may be more to the point, he was aware of the handsome bequest which Horace controlled as guardian.

It has already been hinted that Eric was interested in the Judge's daughter. He had known Joan Bright since the first days of his residence in Corinth, and for just that length of time he had been her devoted, but diffident adorer. It began at the age of six, when he performed for her especial benefit such deeds of valour as standing on his head or hands — (chiefly on the back of his neck or his ear), turning somersaults, walking fence rails,— we've all gone to such lengths to produce an effect on the first lady of our heart. As time wore on, he became more enamoured but less valiant. When he was sixteen, he was positively timorous. He was not in the least backward so far as other girls were concerned; no one was more at ease, more cocksure of himself, more debonair. But with Joan — ah, well! It is an ancient affliction. No man is complete in himself unless he has had this disease and the measles — and recovered from both.

It must be admitted that she, with all the perversity of her sex, denied him the most because she liked him the best. Even young girls are capable of this. It's what makes women of them — the kind of women we go the farthest to please and to whom we are always grateful if the road is tortuous. Joan treated him most cavalierly at times. There was a good and sufficient reason, one affected by all girls of spirit: the tender suspicion, slyly encouraged, that she was in love with him.

Of course, she explained to herself, it was not at all true, and she went to a great deal of pains to convince herself of the fact,— to such pains, I may say, that he also was convinced. She was so confidently heartless in the matter that she rather enjoyed the sensation of being a dear friend to his sister. It is a great comfort to be devoted to the sister of the man you despise.

Eric despaired. Manfully, of course, and in secret. His pride stood in the way of open attention to her. He never danced with her more than once in an evening; he seldom skated with her. But his heart was sore, and he was jealous.

He was grateful to her for the frank affection she bestowed on Mary. It proved Mary's position, and he cared more for that than for anything else in the world. She could hold up her head in Corinth when she walked with Joan Bright. As for himself, he dumbly realised that Joan Bright could never be more to him than the friend of his sister; he could ask for nothing more, being the son of a slayer of men. Was she not the daughter of a judge of men?

To be sure, Mary was cautioned by her aunt not to put evil ideas into the head of the innocent Joan! She had a selfish motive in preserving Judge Bright's daughter from contamination. Joan was an unwitting candidate for the hand of Chetwynd. The alliance, it seems, was desired by Horace. Neither Joan nor Chetwynd was consulted. Nor Judge Bright, for that matter. The Blagdens would see to all that when Chetwynd was a little older.

Mary was permitted to read "The Scarlet Letter" when she was twelve. Her aunt professed a holy horror of the letter A, though just why she thought of it in connection with a mere child — or even an unmarried person,— is not quite clear.

An ordinary bomb, aimed at the smug Blagden serenity, in all likelihood would have created no perceptible disturbance, but one day there came an explosion that not only startled Horace and his wife out of their complacency but quite upset them for all time to come.

Chetwynd was expelled,—dishonourably expelled,—from Harvard!

CHAPTER V

SEAWARD

It was said that Horace aged ten years in less than a week. The shock came about the time of the Easter vacation, and fell from a clear sky. Chetwynd and another youth had been found guilty of indiscretions that could not be overlooked by the powers at Harvard. The true story never quite came to light, but there was a great deal of talk about two chorus girls, disgraceful orgies, voluptuous dances and a brawl in which one of the young women was severely beaten.

Chetwynd was bundled off to Europe, with his mother, to stay until the thing blew over, or, at least, until Horace could clear his perturbed brain of the something that seemed to clog it. Besides, there were the ugly newspaper accounts to be lived down; that is to say, the stories that were printed in the Boston and New York papers. It goes without saying that the Corinth *Courier* ignored the matter. There was not a line of it in the columns of the local paper. Horace Blagden owned the publisher of the *Courier*, body and soul, as well as considerable of the stock in his newspaper.

Todville unhesitatingly assisted in giving voice to all the tales, true and untrue, that came to notice. There was general rejoicing among the inmates of the Seaman's Home, and along the water-front. In the bar-rooms and grogshops there were contests between all who struggled to create the coarsest jests at the expense of the great and spotless man of Corinth. If he could have heard them, the subject of these ribald quips would have shrivelled within himself, and groaned.

Eric and Mary were wise enough to hold their tongues, and to curb a very natural elation. From afar off, they watched the comings and goings of the Rev. Mr. Presbrey, and somehow their keen inner consciousness told them that he, too, in his own way, rejoiced in the downfall of Chetwynd, who had long been a thorn in his side; a thorn he could not well afford to extract, but must endure in patient humility,— as, for instance, the Hindoo fanatic suffers himself to lie on his bed of pointed spikes.

In course of time Mrs. Blagden and Chetwynd returned to Corinth. The summer was waning and raw, fog-laden winds were sweeping in from the sea. All summer long, when other men were sweltering in the heat, Horace Blagden's heart was feeling the raw, chill winds of the sea; there was no warmth in the world for him. Something had frozen within him, and it would never thaw. He went to Boston to meet the returning voyagers; he came back with them to Corinth, outwardly as proud and confident as ever, but inwardly as desolate and humble as the lowliest of Lazaruses.

The sore that hurt him most was the one that opened every time he thought of Mary Blagden's children. Why could it not have been one of them instead of Chetwynd? Why should an ironical malevolent fate have led *his* son into the very mire he had prescribed for hers? Horace could not understand why God had done this thing to him, while Mary's son was so available.

Corinth received the wayward youth without reserve. Houses and arms were opened to him, just as Horace expected; and the tactless assistant paying teller in the bank who politely asked if Chetwynd was to return to Harvard next week, was the one who lost his place in order that the president's son might begin his career as a banker — a little earlier than his father had intended, to be sure, but in accordance with a destiny he had personally arranged. The tactless teller assisted fate to a certain extent by putting the question, for Mr. Blagden was in somewhat of a quandary as to how he could make room for Chetwynd without removing a competent employé. Of course, it was quite obvious that a competent employé would never have asked if Chetwynd were to return to Harvard. It made it very easy to remove him.

Chetwynd rather objected to going into the bank at first. He was quite sure he could make the crew at Yale, if the Governor would only go down to New Haven and "fix it up" with the heads of the institution. It did not enter his head that a man so powerful as Horace Blagden could fail to influence the officials of any college, in spite of the Harvard episode. But Horace said he hoped he would never be called upon to resort to anything so desperate as the sending of a son of his to Yale!

So Chetwynd began his career as a banker sullenly, and in defiance of what he considered his own best interests. He started a moustache, and insisted that it was his right to smoke cigarettes, having taken a course in the art at college.

Besides cigarettes and athletics, Chetwynd had aroused in himself the ambition to become an architect. It struck him as rather humiliating that he should have to give up his chosen profession and go to work in a bank. His father, as a compromise, offered to procure private instruction if he cared to continue the work begun at college, but he would have to assimilate it after banking hours.

"Corinth is no place for an architect who really wants to get anywhere," protested Chetwynd.

"The town is growing, my boy," remarked his father.

"New York is the only place," grumbled the son. "I could *do* something there."

"I fancy Corinth will do for you to practise on," said Horace grimly. "I think, in the end, you will see the advantage of learning the banking business. A Blagden must be at the head of the bank, my boy. I cannot live forever."

"Don't say that, father," protested Chetwynd, with a leer that was meant to be genial.

"You may take up architecture as a side issue, if you like," said Horace patiently. "Just as other men go in for the collecting of first editions, and so on. I know a successful merchant in Boston who devotes his spare time to the painting of portraits, just as a recreation, don't you see. It is —"

"I think I'd like to be a banker for recreation, father, and an architect for keeps."

"You will find I am right," said Horace finally.

"Yes, sir. You always are," agreed his son obediently.

Along toward the middle of the ensuing May, the County board decided to erect a new court-house in Corinth. With calm New England zeal, they prefaced the ultimate decision by offering a medal to the high-school youth who submitted the most artistic design for the building, promising that the final plans should be based on the successful candidate's ideas by the architect who secured the contract. A day or two after the original announcement was made, the words "or any student in Architecture," was inserted in the invitation. This was done in order that Chetwynd Blagden might compete.

The boys of Corinth high school took to the proposition with a zest that was flattering, but not surprising. Eric Midthorne, a senior by this time, had a natural bent for drawing and construction. He, as well as Chetwynd, had notions of becoming an architect and builder, with the distinction that Eric was seriously in earnest, heart and soul. He was to enter Harvard in the fall; his interest in the court-house competition was enhanced by the hope that he might win, and therefore go into college with a no uncertain prestige behind him. He worked faithfully, diligently after school hours on the plans, unhindered by the thought of examinations, for he was well up in his studies, and confident. Other boys in his class went about the plans half-heartedly, once they learned that Eric was putting his hand and brain to the effort. They glumly agreed among themselves that they would have no chance against him, and it was pretty generally conceded that he would carry off the prize, hands down.

Chetwynd was allowed to go to New York over Saturdays and Sundays for special instruction. To all intents and purposes, he was vitally interested in the effort to win. He must have worked hard while in the Metropolis, for he always looked tired and red-eyed on his return to Corinth. On several occasions he failed to reach home before Monday night, but his parents understood and sympathised when he confessed that he had worked all the night before and was so exhausted that he overslept and missed the early trains. He spent two weeks' vacation in New York early in

June, returning at the end of that period, haggard and pale from the effects of over-study. His parents were alarmed but gratified. They liked the bull-dog spirit that moved him to such splendid endeavour.

"He will win," pronounced Horace, calm in a restored pride. "There can be no doubt of it. You cannot appreciate how pleased I am, Presbrey, over his determination. He has it in him. Nothing can stop the boy now; he has found himself."

"He will be a great blessing to you, my dear friend," said Mr. Presbrey. "I have always said that he had it in him, if you remember."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Blagden thoughtfully, "it was for the best that he got away from the evil influences at college."

"I rejoice that you are becoming reconciled to that view, sir. You may recall my remarks at the time. I ventured the opinion that —"

"Really, Presbrey, I don't remember anything that was said at the time," interrupted Horace impatiently.

"Of course not," agreed Mr. Presbrey readily. "How could you? It wasn't to be expected of you. But you see now that I was right, I am sure. Out of evil there —"

"You can't imagine how happy his mother is, Presbrey," said Horace, who had heard all this before and affected not to hear it now.

"She must be," said Mr. Presbrey heartily.

It may be added that Mr. Presbrey, despite his consoling prophecies, was the most amazed man in Corinth over the remarkable regeneration of Chetwynd. Somehow, down in his pious heart, he experienced difficulty in rejoicing.

One Saturday morning, a week before the awarding of the prize for the best design, Eric, having completed his drawings and laid them away in his room to await the time for their presentation to the committee of architects, invited Mary and Joan Bright to go for a short sail in the bay. He was an adept at handling a sail-boat, confident but not reckless, and many an old seaman had complimented him on his prowess. He had taken Mary and other girls out beyond Lord's Point on numerous occasions, but never before had he screwed up courage to ask Joan to take a seat in the boat. While he gloomily deplored his lack of initiative in this respect, she, it must be said, rather petulantly, but in secret, resented what she chose to regard as a rude oversight,— a slight, if you please.

To his surprise and joy, she consented to go out with him on this memorable occasion, being in a particularly good humour and unusually gracious.

It was not uncommon for the young people of the town to go sailing in the placid little bay; no parent objected if they did not venture into the open sea. The bay was full of fishing-boats, coming and going, and there was little or no danger if the weather was good.

At the last minute, Mrs. Blagden refused to let Mary go, keeping her at home on some pretext. Of course, that came near to spoiling the sport of the morning. Joan, however, arose in her independence, and announced her readiness to go out for an hour without Mary.

"I'm glad I haven't an aunt to treat me as *she* treats you," she said to Mary, and then went off to the little pier with the delighted Eric, who, after all, was a bit grateful to Aunt Rena, although, in his heart, he was sorry for Mary.

The day was bright and clear, with a fine, light wind blowing steadily from the ocean. They planned to sail to the Point, turn and cross the mouth of the bay just inside the swell of the sea, and then come racing in with a fresh three-quarter breeze. In two hours they would be back at the pier, where Mary was to meet them.

Joan poised herself comfortably on the rail. Her cheeks were warm with excitement and her eyes danced to the tune his heart was singing, all unbeknownst to her. Never in all his life had he been so happy as now, and never so self-consciously stupid. She chatted gaily, easily, while he, in his exaltation, responded so inaptly that in time, forsooth, he fell to making hard work of the sail in order to cover his confusion.

He looked out to sea, and into his soul there came the longing to sail on forever with her, straight into the boundless waste, where he might rise to such heights of heroism that confidence would come to him, and he would not be afraid of her. He was not afraid of the sea, but his heart quailed before that smooth, mobile cheek and those limpid, wrathless eyes. And yet he was ineffably happy. Surely he had her all to himself now. But to what purpose?

Steadily the airy craft beat its way through the greenish, glinting waters of the bay, heeling, righting, swashing, sending its genial spray into their faces, pointing, as a dog points,— as if it were a thing of life with an instinct of its own. Joan dodged and shifted as the boom swung over, laughed with glee when the spray threatened her reefer. Her soft brown hair played in the wind; the red bow at her throat fluttered or flattened as the wind ordained; her trim, slender body was braced against the rush of air, active, alert, all unconscious of the picture she made.

His head was bare. His dark hair lay back from his forehead. His eyes gleamed with the fever of exaltation. When they were not stealing sly glances at her, they were set straight ahead, focussed on the distant Point as if it were a thing to avoid.

"It's great, isn't it?" he called out to her.

"Splendid!" she sang. "I love it! I love it!"

"Will you come out again?"

She caught herself up. "I don't know." As he did not press the invitation, she was driven to the curt question: "When?"

"Any day you like," he replied eagerly. "Will you, Joan?"

"If your aunt will let Mary come, too," she said, mischief in her heart.

"Certainly," he acquiesced, much too readily to please her vanity.

"Are you sure you know how to sail a boat, Eric?" she asked, so innocently that his pride was hurt in turn.

"Ain't I sailing her all right to-day?" he demanded.

She was instantly ashamed of herself. "It was mean of me to ask that question," she cried. "Everyone knows you are very skilful, Eric. Of course, I'm not afraid. I'll come whenever you ask me." Then, seeing the glad sparkle in his eyes: "If the weather is fine. It would be awful to be out in a little boat like this if a storm came up. Goodness, what could we do?"

"Beat for the shore as fast as we could," he replied grimly. "We could get in ahead of any storm."

"But suppose that the storm came from the shore and not from the sea. What then?"

"We'd be geese to let it catch us far out. Oh, it's simple enough."

"If we were geese we could swim in," she said gaily.

"Sure," he agreed, and they laughed aloud.

She was silent for awhile, furtively studying his half-averted face. He was bringing the boat around with her nose toward the town, instead of following the course they had planned to take.

"Have you completed the plans, Eric?"

"Yes," he replied. "They're off my mind."

"I *do* hope you will win. Everyone says you are sure to."

He did not answer at once. It struck her that he was singularly inattentive. The sail flapped viciously and the little craft heeled over as the boom swung around. A vast shadow came swimming out over the water, turning the soft green to a blackish blue. The girl turned her head quickly in alarm.

"Oh!" she cried, her eyes widening.

"Don't be nervous," he said calmly. "There's plenty of time."

From the hills back of Corinth a great wall of black clouds was rushing out upon them, leaping higher and higher against the sunlit opal sky. The very thing she had mentioned, half in banter, had come to pass. Storm clouds were indeed coming down from the shore, and they were ugly, menacing ones at that.

Her remark had caused the enraptured boy to cast a casual glance shoreward. He had seen then, for the first time, the rim of black that capped the green hills, and, without alarming her, he quickly altered the course of the boat. He knew that the storm was close at hand: one of those swift, violent summer storms that swoop out of nowhere, it would seem, and sail down to the sea, to be lost or dissipated in the vast air currents that scorn so small a thing as a land breeze, no matter how fierce it may appear on its native heath.

"You must hurry, Eric," cried the girl, dread in her eyes. "Tell me, what can I do to help? I am not afraid."

"It's funny I never noticed it coming," he muttered irrelevantly. There was much tacking to do, for the wind had shifted and they were still three miles or more from the piers. She sat, still and tense, looking straight ahead into the black banks after this, realising in some subtle way that it was no time to talk.

. . . .

They did not reach the piers. Long before they were half-way in, the gale broke over the frail craft, whipping it about as if it were a cork. They did not reach the piers and for a good reason.

Instead, they were going out to sea, clinging to the bottom of the overturned boat, lashed and buffeted by blinding waves, and stung by the cutting rain. The sea roared and churned beneath them, the skies thundered and crashed above, and there was no one near to help them, no one near enough even to see them in their plight.

When the boat went over, Joan was hurled far out from its side. Eric was after her in a flash, clasping her in his arms as she came to the surface, gasping and choking. He was a strong, courageous swimmer. Crying out to her to be brave and calm, he struck out to overtake the black, slim bottom of the boat, which was dancing away from them on the waves. It was a hard, almost hopeless task, but he struggled manfully, finally coming near enough to grasp the rudder with his free hand. After a while he was able to draw her up to the centre-board. There she clung with desperate strength, while he set about the hazardous undertaking of retrieving the long spare end of a rope which whipped about in the sea. He released it from its fastening with his pocket knife, and then proceeded to lash it across the keel of the boat, looping it first over one oar-lock and then the other, all the while climbing back and forth over the slippery surface with the agility and sureness of a monkey.

The girl was in this manner lashed quite firmly to the boat, and there was little or no likelihood of her slipping off into the water if a faintness seized her. After making her secure, he stayed himself in a somewhat similar fashion just opposite to her, close enough to support her in case she grew weak with despair and fear.

All this time they had been crying out words of cheer to each other. Neither was of faint heart, for they were young and full of the right to live, but they were full of fear and dread. They were going out to sea.

"Someone will see us," he cried, when he could get his breath. "It's only a little blow. These storms don't last long. The sun will be out in a few minutes. Don't worry, Joan. Mary knows we're out here, and so do lots of people. They'll have boats out in less than no time."

But the storm raged with great fierceness for an hour before breaking, and they were driven swiftly, resistlessly out to sea, where the waves were running high. Time and again they were almost completely submerged. The water-tight compartments in the bow and stern of the boat kept it afloat. They were in no danger of going to the bottom as long as they were not torn bodily from their fastenings. Each time they were swept under by a great wave, his hand clasped her arm in a grip of iron; each time that they came through, half choked, they looked wildly at each other to be sure that one had not been swept away, and each time a dismal smile flitted across their faces.

Eric turned his anxious gaze toward the distant town whenever they rode high on a wave, and each time he searched in vain for a rescuing craft. The town was now so far away that it was impossible to make out the buildings along the shore. The hills were dim and indistinct, even in the bright sunlight that was following the storm. His face grew haggard with worry, his eyes wide with despair.

"What can be the matter with everybody?" he groaned. "Mary must have given the alarm."

"They'll come, Eric," she cried back tremulously. "They *will* come soon, won't they?"

"Yes," he answered, touching her cheek with his hand. "They're sure to come."

"It would be awful to go away out to sea like this," she whimpered.

"It's my fault — it's all my fault, Joan," he cried, in anguish. "If anything *should* happen, it's my fault. I *am* a murderer — that's all I am."

"You must not say that."

"They said I'd be a murderer —"

"Sh! Eric! You couldn't help this. I don't care what they say. You are brave and good and true."

"Have they said it to you?" he demanded, turning his red, water-stung eyes upon her white face.

"No one but Chetwynd. I hate him."

"I say," he shouted, suddenly craning his neck to look far ahead, a thrill shooting through his icy body. "We're going straight toward Eddy's Islands. God may be good to us, Joan. We may be driven ashore on one of them. I — I thought we were going due east. I can see the islands away off there — miles and miles. Oh, if we only keep straight for them!"

Eddy's Islands were two small reefs, twenty miles off the coast, barren, ugly things that rose high in the air. On one of them was a lighthouse. A space of two miles or more separated the reefs, with a strong current driving between them. Big Eddy had the lighthouse, Little Eddy was without sign of life or vegetation: just a low, forbidding, sea-washed plane of rock, full of caves and crevasses. There was no beach on either of the islands, of course, but the rocky formation sloped into the water so gradually that it was dangerous for even small craft to approach close to them.

At the rate they were going, Eric calculated that two hours would bring them abreast Eddy's Islands. If they passed to the north, the light-keeper would see them. Joan's dress was white. If they went to the south, or between the two, there was small chance of their being seen, unless the keeper was watching the sea closely with his glass. Their brightest hope lay in the possibility that they might be driven into the shallow waters covering the unseen approach to the reefs. Eric knew the waters well. He had gone there dozens of times with the fishing boats.

The sky was now clear, and a hot sun beat down upon them; the storm was rollicking far ahead of them. A steady wind from the shore was blowing, and soon the tide would come out. Waves still ran high, but they were not so angry as they had been.

Eric could see that the girl was growing weak from the strain and exposure. He was no longer able to cheer her with his heartiest cries. She looked wan and ready to give up the struggle to keep her head from falling forward, limp with fatigue.

To his despair, the current caught them up and drew them toward the passage between the islands. He began to pray. His whole soul cried out to God, imploring Him to send them onto the shoals where he could have a chance to save the girl whose life was more to him now than anything else in all the world. His own strength and vitality were fast departing; his limbs were chilled and numb, his senses dulled and sluggish with the drug of weariness.

He could see that they would drift past the upper end of Little Eddy, perhaps a hundred yards from the visible rocks. The broad, heaving ocean lay directly beyond. It was clear to him that they had not been observed by the light-keeper. Just as he was in the deepest despair, the impulse to cut loose from the boat and try for the rocks came over him. He could easily swim that distance alone, but was his strength sufficient to do it with the almost dead weight of the girl as a burden?

Eric was always quick to act. He was cool, but he was daring. The thought was father to the act. He drew up his stiffened legs and began to unlace his shoes, first rolling his trousers up to the knees. Kicking off the heavy shoes, he clambered over the boat and set to work releasing Joan. She was faint, but conscious of his action.

" I'm going to swim in with you, Joan. Don't be afraid. Do just as I tell you, and we'll soon be safe. We'll be able to wade after we get within twenty yards of the rock."

She followed his instructions to the best of her ability, and soon he was struggling frantically toward the ugly, forbidding wall of rock, swimming with all the power that was left in his racked young body. Many a stronger swimmer than he would have failed in the attempt, but a strange, unnatural vigour came to his aid, born of pride and desperation.

Just as he realised that he could not swim a stroke farther, and the goal still many yards away, his numb feet struck against hard substance. He involuntarily, even recklessly, allowed them to sink in the hope of touching bottom.

He was on the shelving rock!

Still there were many yards to traverse, and he would have to carry her all the way, battling against the small but stubborn breakers. How he covered the distance, stumbling, falling, scrambling, he never could have told, but after what seemed an hour, he crept out of the breakers and fell exhausted on the rock, dragging Joan after him. Scarcely able to move his tired limbs, he pulled and tugged until they were well out of the baffled waters, and then he rolled over on his back and gasped for breath.

It was the girl who first showed signs of recuperation. She raised herself to a sitting posture, supporting her body with her hands, and studied the limp figure at her side through bewildered, half-understanding eyes. Her mind worked slowly, so slowly that a full minute passed before she realised that he was as motionless as death itself. Then her hand went out, timorously, dumbly, to touch the pallid face. The fear that was growing in her faintly beating heart was dispelled almost instantly, quite before it was fully formed: he opened his eyes at her touch. For a long time they looked into each other's eyes, and then a wry smile broke on his lips.

"Gee," he said, in very shaky tones, "I guess you've got a right to think I'm an awful duffer."

"I — I thought you were — Oh, Eric, you are *not* dead! I am so glad — so glad!" she sobbed, clasping her hands to her breast.

"I — I didn't dare to look at you, Joan," he murmured hoarsely, a spasm of pain convulsing his face. "I was afraid — afraid you hadn't come through all right. Oh, if you had not touched me when you did I should have died. I believe I held my breath for an hour. Thank God, thank God!"

He sat up beside her, touched her hands, her face with his fingers. A smile of relief, of actual glee, spread over his face like an illumination. He drew a great, deep breath, as she smiled wanly in return, and then staggered to his feet to shout and dance like one bereft of his senses.

CHAPTER VI

THE REVEALING OF SEVERAL INSTINCTS

After his wild exhilaration had spent itself to some extent, he set about doing sensible things, and uttering rational words.

"It may not be such a laughing matter, after all," he said lugubriously. "We're on a desert island." His gaze swept the sunlit, tumbling sea. "I'm afraid they can't make us out from the lighthouse."

"I'm glad we're here and not out there on that poor little boat," she cried, getting to her feet and pointing off to the right. "Look! It's through the channel."

The belly of the boat was to be seen bobbing on the waves far beyond the mouth of the passage.

They watched it for a long time in silence and dread. A shudder swept over them and they clasped hands, looking again into each other's dismayed eyes.

"God knows where that boat will go before it finds a resting place," he murmured. "I'm glad I made the try for shore." He grinned. "We'd be well on our way to Europe — or maybe Africa, Joan, before night. Or Davy Jones' locker, as old Jabez Carr would say."

"I prefer Eddy's Islands," she said simply. She stood beside him, straight and slim, her drenched garments clinging to her body as if glued, her soft brown hair plastered down and matted with the salt of the sea, her hat hanging limp and desolate over her shoulder. "Do you suppose they will send boats out to search for us, Eric?"

"Of course they will," he cried cheerfully. But there was no sail to be seen, strain their eyes as they would in the direction of the mainland.

"We might as well explore the island," he went on, hiding the anxious note in his voice. "It can't be later than three o'clock. They'll be here before dark, sure. Wait! Let me think a minute."

He stood there looking quizzically up at the sky. The June sun had resumed its boiling heat. The breeze, though brisk, was warm and soft, with the smell of the land and vegetation.

"Our clothes will soon dry out in this sunshine," he reflected aloud. "We're no worse off than if we'd just come out of the surf and were sunning ourselves on the beach. Maybe you'd —" He hesitated in some embarrassment. "Maybe you'd like to be left alone for awhile, Joan, to — to tidy yourself up a bit."

She looked surprised and grateful.

"I'll take a look about the island by myself, first, and be back in an hour."

"I am a perfect fright," she said disconsolately.

"No, you're not," he cried warmly. Then he left her. She watched him scramble off among the rocks above, and then, with a sigh of despair, began fumbling for combs in the hopelessly gnarled mass of hair.

When he came back whistling from his detour of the bleak little island, on which grew not a single spear of vegetation, she was sitting composedly in the sun, her long brown hair hanging loose to dry, her wistful eyes gazing out over the water in the direction of home. She had removed her shoes and stockings, and they, too, were drying near at hand. Somehow, you had the feeling that her shirt-waist and the duck skirt also had been wrung out and dried and pressed into an amazingly presentable shape. The eternal feminine in her!

He, too, was barefooted. The rocks were growing hot beneath the rays of the sun. He walked with the tender care of one who finds discomfort in the act of putting down his foot.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "That's the way Mary dries her hair," he added in the most matter-of-fact way.

She pouted. "Don't you like it this way? I'll put it up at —"

"Don't! I like it! It's gorgeous. Goodness, I'd never think you had so much hair. You — you can sit on it, can't you?"

"No one sits on her hair," she retorted, not quite sure whether to be pleased. "Eric, I must have a drink of water."

His face brightened. "There isn't a sign of a spring on Little Eddy," he said.

"What!" she wailed.

"But," he added triumphantly, "I found a pool of rain water up there at the top, and covered it with a slab of stone, so's it wouldn't evaporate. Come along. I'll show you over the island if — Gee! Doesn't it burn *your* feet?"

"Ooh! I should say it does!" she cried, screwing her face into an exaggerated expression of pain. They were young.

Together they picked their way to the pool he had so thoughtfully located and preserved. Then they sought the shade of the shelving rock and sat down to wait, their gaze turned ever shoreward, searching the horizon for sails or the smoke of tugs.

The afternoon wore away, and the gloom of dusk began to settle over the blue waters, the evening mist creeping out from the shore to meet the shadows from the mysterious east. The castaways, so near to home yet so far from its security, fell into a dull, brooding silence, their thoughts crowded with vague fears and a certain growing resentment toward those on shore, who were failing them. They could not understand why a whole fleet of boats had not put forth at once to search for them. Was not she the daughter of a Supreme Court Judge? Was not he the nephew of the great Horace Blagden? Why, then, were they being treated with such indifference, such inexplicable disdain? Could it be possible that no one cared what became of them? A thousand bitter thoughts assailed them as they sat there, staring out over the darkening sea. Neither complained aloud, and yet both had come to feel that they would not be found that night.

The great revolving lantern in the distant lighthouse sent out its beams; the stars struggled through the scattering mists, and the solemn moon spread a soft glow over their world of desolation. The lapping of the waves, the regular swish of disturbed waters against the lonely reef were the only sounds that fell upon their ears. They were hungry, exhausted, despairing, out there alone on the breast of the sea.

"Don't be afraid, Joan," he whispered, leaning close to her, infinite tenderness in his hushed voice. "Nothing can happen to us to-night. They'll surely come in the morning."

"I'm not really afraid, Eric," she said, but there was awe in her voice. "But isn't it lonely? Isn't it awful to be alone out here?" She crept a little closer to him.

He quelled the tender impulse to clasp her in his arms, and hold her close to him so that she might sleep in security all the night long, with her head on his shoulder, her hand in his. A strange bashfulness came over him, surpassing anything he had ever felt before.

It was a part of the infinitely gentle love that was in his heart; something that came out of the loneliness to show him how sacred, how pure love is.

Very gently he bade her lean back and rest her head against his shoulder, and sleep. He would keep watch. . . .

The moon passed slowly over the great dome above and disappeared behind the wall of rock that sheltered them. She had been asleep for hours. Then his tired eyes closed and their heads touched in sweet oblivion. . . .

The sun was shining brightly when he opened his eyes.

A man stood over them, with a pitying, though satisfied half-smile on his hard face. Eric blinked his eyes, and rubbed them, staring harder and harder.

"Why — why —" he murmured in utter bewilderment.

"The babes in the woods," remarked the thick-set man, with a satirical chuckle. "Only it happens to be the sea instead of a wood. Do you know what time it is?"

"How did you get here?" demanded Eric, unable to conquer his amazement. The girl stirred and then sat bolt upright, staring at the sinister face of the man, whose hands were deep in his coat pockets, his legs spread far apart.

"I walked on the water," was his sacrilegious answer. "It's ten o'clock. Four bells. Will you have your eggs fried or boiled?"

Eric managed to grin. "Fried," he said, conscious of a great hunger. Joan's face brightened at once.

"Can we go home?" she cried.

"Sure, Miss Bright. My private yacht is lying off here, with steam up. The dinghy awaits. Will you put on your shoes and stockings?"

Joan blushed hotly and drew her feet up under her skirts. Eric had got to his feet and was running to the corner of the ledge to look for the craft. There it lay, in the lee of the reef, a smudgy, unlovely, chortling tug-boat, smoky and impatient, with half a dozen grimy individuals on board, all of whom were surveying the reef with the nonchalance of men used to disaster. A small row-boat, with a single occupant, puttered along the edge of the reef, waiting for the master who had come ashore. Eric sent up a shout and waved his hand. A voice at his elbow spoke.

"I thought I'd find you here. Everyone else is looking to the south of the Point, everywhere but the right place. Thinks I, they've gone out to sea. So we started straight out." He chuckled. "It's a joke on those wise chaps,—your uncle and the preacher and all of 'em, looking in the bay and dragging, and praying, and cursing the luck."

"How did you think of looking away out here, Mr. Carr?"

Adam Carr closed one eye. "I always have great luck in finding people where they don't expect to be found," he said enigmatically. "I figured on these reefs, and telephoned out to the light-keeper, asking if he'd seen a capsised boat go by. He said he thought he saw one away out to sea yesterday afternoon. Father said to me right then and there that if you had half a chance you'd make one of the reefs. He seems to think you're made of the right stuff, Mr. Eric Midthorne. And here we are. If you hadn't been here, I'd have known where you were." He screwed up his lips significantly and pointed downward with his stubby thumb.

"At the bottom of the sea," said Eric, with a shudder.

"Yes. But you'd have come ashore in time, I daresay. Well! Here's Miss Bright. Now we can be off. I'll have the eggs fried in the engine room."

"Did you really think about bringing eggs?" cried Eric.

"Eggs and coffee," responded the hard-faced man, as he motioned for his oarsman to approach.

"What a horrid looking man," whispered Joan, when his back was turned.

"I can't make him out," muttered Eric. "He's Jabez Carr's son. I didn't know he was in Corinth."

Later on, he deliberately put the question to Adam Carr: "Where did you come from, Mr. Carr?"

They had finished eating their eggs and were sitting on the after deck with their strange rescuer. The tug, with a vast ado in its boilers, careened through the bright waves, leaving behind a long, almost unending trail of smoke.

Adam Carr's inscrutable face took on a new line or two. "I guess you wouldn't be any the wiser if I told you. It's more than likely you never heard of the place."

"Oh, do tell us," cried Joan, who had become deeply interested in the man. Despite his ugliness, despite the sinister face of him, he possessed a certain fascinating individuality that impressed her, as it did all young persons susceptible to curiosity.

"Ever hear of Tasmir?" he asked laconically.

They pondered and shook their heads.

"I thought so. So you are none the wiser, are you?"

They sheepishly admitted the fact.

"Is it a city or a country?" asked Eric.

"It's neither," he affirmed. He grinned in a most tantalising manner. Afterwards they were to learn that Tasmir was the seat of a Russian nobleman.

"Well," said Eric, hiding his chagrin and resentment, "I'm glad you came, no matter where you came from. It must have been like looking for a needle in a haystack, but still you found us."

"I've never tried to find a needle in a haystack," said Adam Carr reflectively. "I'm sure it must be interesting. I'll try sometime."

"What a queer man you are, Mr. Carr," cried Joan impulsively. He stared at her, and she shrank inwardly from the sardonic glitter in his eyes.

He chuckled mirthlessly. "I hope not," he said. "Queer men never get anywhere, Miss Bright. For instance, the fellow who looks for a needle, when there are so many other things to look for that are worth finding. You'd call him a queer chap, I'd say. I've found things in my time that would make looking for a needle seem the easiest task in the world. But," he added, after a short pause, "I still think if you'd lost a needle in a haystack and you just had to have that needle back in your sewing bag, I could find it for you if you made it worth while for me to do so."

"No one could possibly want a needle so much as all that," she cried, perplexed by his humour.

"In any event," said he, continuing in the same vein, "a needle is a very handy thing to have about if you possess a trick camel."

Joan and Eric were thoughtful for a moment, analysing the remark. They saw the point simultaneously and laughed aloud.

"It would have to be a very big needle or a very tiny camel," cried she.

"We'll leave that to the imagination," said he, "as we do most everything else that really doesn't matter."

Eric's eyes gleamed with a sudden discovery.

"What were you doing in Tasmir, Mr. Carr?"

"I was looking for a much sharper thing than a needle," said Adam Carr.

"Did you find it?"

"I did."

Eric's voice thrilled with excitement. "I know what you are now. Gee!" He gazed at the mask-like face in open-eyed wonder. "You are a detective."

"Sometimes I doubt it," was Adam Carr's extraordinary way of acknowledging his profession.

A two hours' run brought the tug to within hailing distance of the heterogeneous fleet of small craft, cruising in the outer bay. There was no mistaking the business of these slow-moving boats, big and little. They were engaged in the hopeless, the imbecile task of dragging the bay, an undertaking inspired by the command of Horace Blagden himself. Not that Horace, who was a calm and sensible man, thought that the bodies could be recovered from the boundless, shifting waters by any such means, but that he regarded it as his imperative duty — you might say his personal prerogative — to make such a showing of resoluteness, such defiance of the utterly impossible,— that all Corinth would rise up and say in the same breath that he had at least left no stone unturned, if the simile may be applied to the case.

Dozens of boats of all descriptions were plying the blue waters of the bay. Recognising the futility of their efforts, the crews lay back at ease, smoking and gazing complacently in quite the opposite direction from that which their business required: they looked lazily at the blue sky from the flat of their backs, instead of at the water in which it was reflected. They were being well paid for their efforts, which, after all resolved itself into a sort of special pageant arranged for the perpetuation of Horace Blagden's name for indomitableness.

The tug blew its triumphant blasts, and even as the futile searchers awoke from their lethargy, hurried past them toward the docks, almost scornful in its haste. Behind trailed the astonished, irritated boatmen, a long line of odds and ends converging to a certain point.

"Call up my uncle's house and let him know," said Eric as they clambered to the pier.

"No," objected Adam Carr, "you'll be sure to find him at the bank. A little thing like this wouldn't disturb the habit of a lifetime."

Sure enough, Horace Blagden was at the bank. Over the telephone, in response to the message from the dock, he said:

"Indeed! Well, I declare! Tell Eric to go home at once. His aunt is worried. Who found them? Carr? Ask him to stop at the bank in a day or two. Thank you. Good-bye."

. . . .

For two or three days after his return to the "Giant's Castle," Eric was vaguely aware of a troubled, pre-occupied look in his sister's eyes; dark circles began to appear beneath them, and a certain pathetic wistfulness came into their depths when he seemed to be asking questions of her with his own puzzled, but observing eyes.

At first he attributed these signs to the worry and grief that must have tortured her on that eventful day and night, but as her very gladness in having him with her once more seemed tinged with a strange, unusual reserve, he was at last forced to believe that there was something else on her mind. Her joy in seeing him had been wild, almost to the point of delirium. She had sobbed in his arms for hours, it seemed to him, and she was reluctant to have him out of her sight. Her sombre plaintive eyes followed him everywhere, until he began to feel a haunting dread of them.

She was paler than he had ever known her to be, and she was spiritless: a most unnatural condition for her, who was so gay and volatile and full of the joy of living.

On the morning of the day selected by the committee for the awarding of the prize, he bluntly commanded her to tell him what it was that troubled her. They had been chatting with old Jabez and his son Adam, at the gate-keeper's lodge, and she had failed utterly to respond to the jokes of the perplexed old man, who crustily demanded the cause of her "grouch." Eric noticed that Adam Carr studied her pale face with peculiar intentness. The detective had been telling him of his interview with Horace Blagden a few days before. At the mention of Chetwynd's name, the girl looked up with a quick, half-frightened gleam in her eyes.

"What is it, Mary? Tell me," pleaded Eric as they were walking homeward across the meadow.

"It's nothing, Eric," she protested, over and over again.

"There's something wrong," he insisted. "I know it. You can't fool me, girlie. What's up?" He waited for a moment and then blurted out: "What has Chetwynd been doing?"

She burst into tears and threw herself upon the ground at the foot of the great oak near the gate in the wall surrounding the Blagden place. He was down beside her in an instant, pleading, begging, urging her to tell him everything.

Then the story came out.

"She is so cruel," sobbed Mary. "Oh, Eric, I don't see how she can have the heart to think the things she does. I haven't done anything wrong. I *am* a good girl."

He grew stiff and cold. "Tell me," he whispered.

She turned over and lay flat on her back, her arms extended in the surrender to despair, her wet eyes staring at the green leaves above.

"It was Chetwynd," she began jerkily. "Oh, how I loathe him. He —"

"What has that beast done to you?" cried Eric, a fearful dread in his soul.

"Wait. I'll tell you. The day you and Joan went out in the boat he stayed at home that morning, you remember, with a headache, he said. He was lying on the couch in the library when I came in. He called me in. Aunt Rena was over town, shopping. Oh, Eric, I can't bear to tell you."

"Go on!" he grated, his fingers working.

"He asked me to sit down and read to him. It would rest him, he said. Pretty soon he asked me to stop and get a cold cloth for his head. When I — when I started to put the cloth on his forehead, he grabbed me and pulled me down beside him. He — he kissed me, Eric — oh, he held me as if his arms were of iron! I fought him, I tried to get away, I tried to scream! He had not kissed me since we were little children, and oh, it was so different. He said he'd kill me if I didn't keep still. But I wouldn't keep still. I was so afraid of him. I thought I should die. At last I got away from him and ran out of the room. He followed and caught me in the hall. I was so weak, so dreadfully scared I could hardly stand, but I tried to beat him off. He was holding me tight and kissing me — Oh! Oh!" She closed her eyes before going on. "His breath was so hot, so awful of cigarettes. I was suffocating. I couldn't breathe. He kept saying, over and over again, that it would be all right and that I must never tell. Then the hall door opened and Aunt Rena came in. I didn't see her, at first, but I knew something had happened, for he suddenly let go of me. I heard him say a horrid word, under his breath. When I saw Aunt Rena I flew to her and tried to tell her what had happened. I begged her not to let him come near me. But — Eric! Eric!"

She stopped short, her hands clenched. He was trembling like a leaf, and his jaw was working like that of an animal. Veins stood out in his forehead. He was seeing things red.

"Eric," she moaned, "Aunt Rena wouldn't listen to me. She turned on me and pushed me away, calling me a 'hussy,' a 'wretch,'— Oh, worse than that! I couldn't make her understand. I couldn't make her believe that I was not to blame. She accused me of everything dreadful. She said I was leading Chetwynd into — to do wicked, low things. Oh, I can't tell you all she said. I was so stunned, so helpless, I — I couldn't believe it was really true. When I begged him to tell her the truth, he only grinned and told me to 'shut up and take my medicine.' He was through with me. I couldn't trifle with him. That's what he said, Eric. And she believed him. She called him her poor boy, her angel — Oh, I shall never live through this, Eric. I want to die."

Eric could not utter a word. His lips moved, but only hoarse, inarticulate sounds came forth. She waited awhile, then went on, drearily.

"Aunt Rena wanted to turn me out into the street, but he objected to that. He said I was not altogether to blame. In a sneering sort of way, he made out as if he were willing to take all the blame. She called him noble, gallant, self-sacrificing! You should have heard her. In the library he got her to promise not to say a word to Uncle Horace about it. If I left the house, he said, he would go, too. It scared her. She said it was best to keep it all to ourselves. I was to be given another chance. And I was locked in my room because I said I would run away. She kept me there all afternoon, all through the storm, until Mrs. Presbrey came to talk to me. I —"

Her brother leaped to his feet, glaring about like a wild beast.

"Damn him! Damn her!" he cried furiously. "I'll beat her brains out!"

He started toward the gate, staggering blindly. Mary sped after him, grasping his arm in frantic alarm.

"Let go of me!" he snarled. "Do you suppose that cur can treat you as he did and not pay for it? I'll kill him!"

"You must be sensible! Listen to me, Eric, dear. Listen! Don't say such things. For my sake!"

"He's not fit to live! I've always hated him. It would serve Aunt Rena right, if I were to kill her angel, her darling. Let go, Mary! Just think of what he did to you."

But she clung to him in desperation, murmuring over and over again through white, paralysed lips: "You must not kill him. Thou shalt not kill! Thou shalt not kill!"

"What good does it do to preach?" he cried angrily. "Nobody pays any attention to the ten commandments nowadays. Why should I?"

"*I* do, Eric. I am not going to be what they say I'll be. Why should you? Why should you commit murder? Do you want old Presbrey to say 'I told you so,' when he goes to see you in the gaol? Do you want to be hung, as that man was in Ridgely County? The one they always tell you about? Oh, I shouldn't have told you what Chetwynd did to me. I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you'd take it like this."

The boy's struggles and ranting ceased abruptly. A pallor spread over his face. The words "murder," "hung," "Presbrey," ran together in his brain, creating a jumble out of which a cold, deathly calmness emerged. His mind began to work in an entirely different direction. Somehow, inexplicable to him, a strange subtleness, a sharp cunning, took the place of blind rage and despair. He suddenly realised how near he had been to doing the very thing that would have proved their estimate of him even to their own cost. To Mary's amazement, he broke in upon her renewed pleadings, with a hoarse, unnatural laugh.

"Wouldn't it be a horrible joke on them if I *did* commit murder, with Chetwynd as my victim? Good heavens, how Uncle Horace would look! He'd have to be surprised at that. And Aunt Rena would have something to talk about all the rest of her life. And say! Old Presbrey and Julia! They'd just die of shame to think that they hadn't let me go my own way long ago, so's I might have killed someone else before I got Chetwynd."

"Eric," she cried in distress, "how strangely you talk."

He grasped her by the hand, moved by an impulse to run wildly. "Come on," he shouted. "I've got to do something. I've got to wear it off. Let's run! Let's run to Stone Wall."

Stone Wall was the name given to a rocky stretch of coast beyond Todville, a secret and unlovely place where the surf beat with incessant roars or sighs, as the case might be, always pounding. A resting place for gulls, abhorred by man, useless and scorned as a place unfinished by the Creator. Thither fared all those who sought solitude for reflection, all those who contemplated suicide, or those who pursued Love when it was least timid.

Hours afterward, Mary and Eric came away from the moss-covered rocks of Stone Wall, and slowly made their way, through the dense thickets and across sweet meadows, back to the hated little gate in the Blagden garden wall. They were calm and strangely subdued. They had talked it all out, down there on the rocks, and they had found solace in mutually resigning themselves to the inevitable.

"It can't be forever, Eric," she had said.

"No," he said, gritting his teeth, "God won't let it go that far."

And so it was, that Eric found out what troubled his sister Mary, and why her eyes were full of dread.

They passed by old Jabez on their way up. He was leaning over the gate, blandly surveying them through the smoke of his pipe.

"Where's Mr. Adam, Uncle Jabe?" sang out Eric from across the road.

"He went to New York on the two o'clock train," replied the ancient. "Quite sudden, too. But he's allus doin' things he didn't intend to do ten minutes afore he does 'em. Dangdest boy I ever see."

The boy and girl dreaded the ordeal of dinner with the family. They would have to face Aunt Rena and Chetwynd, and it was going to be hard for Eric to be polite and agreeable. But they were to be spared the presence of Chetwynd, it afterward developed.

Just before the dinner gong sounded, Eric met his aunt in the upper hall. He swallowed hard and then put as much heartiness in his voice as he could muster.

"Where's Chetwynd, Aunt Rena?"

"He has gone to New York. Why?"

"New York? In the middle of the week?"

"Certainly. He has been half-sick for a week. A few days' rest from the tedious work in the bank will do him a world of good. He's to see Dr. Throgmartin tomorrow about those dreadful headaches."

"The judges were to award the prize this afternoon," observed Eric. "Didn't he care to wait and see how the contest came out?"

She smiled complacently, comfortably. "Oh, he wasn't worried. He is so sure to win. And why shouldn't he? He has made *such* a study of it."

"I guess that's why he has the headaches," said Eric innocently. She looked at him again, very sharply.

"Where is Mary?" she demanded.

"In her room, I think. You needn't question her, Aunt Rena. She told me what Chetwynd did to her, and what you said to her. I want you to know that I know. It —"

"Eric," she said, "I must ask you not to be so insolent. You must not stand —"

He held his ground, confronting her with set face and unwavering eyes.

"I do not mean to be insolent, Aunt Rena. But we've just got to understand each other. It needn't go any farther, if you like.— I mean Uncle Horace isn't to know. I just have to say this: Mary was not to blame. I know it, and down in your heart you know it. Chetwynd acted like a dirty brute, and you took his part. I don't want him to apologise to Mary. I don't want a word more said about it. I'm not afraid to say this to you, because I know and you know that if Mary went to Uncle Horace with that story, *he*'d believe her and he'd kick his own son out of the house. That's just what Uncle Horace would do, and you know it. He *knows* Mary isn't that kind of a girl, just as well as you know it. That's all I have to say. The incident is closed, unless you choose to re-open it."

She stood there staring after him, with a limp lower lip, and the glaze of stupefaction over her eyes. He coolly descended the stairs and entered the library. Then she went into her bed-room and wept softly until dinner time.

Mary found Eric on the porch soon after the meeting in the hall.

"Eric," she whispered, in awed tones, "Aunt Rena is crying in her room. I heard her as plain as anything."

"It always does a woman good to cry," remarked the young philosopher, with a hardening of the muscles in his jaw.

Mary was looking down the tree-lined walk.

"Oh, goodness," she cried, in dismay. "See who's coming to dinner with Uncle Horace."

Eric turned up his eyes and groaned with sepulchral devoutness.

Horace was entering the gate with the estimable Presbreys, both of whom were rigged up fit to eat — and that is really what they had got themselves up for.

As they came up the steps, Mr. Blagden blandly addressed the boy and girl standing at the rail above.

"I suppose you're waiting to hear who won the prize."

Eric began to tremble with a sudden, overpowering excitement. He was to hear himself proclaimed the winner!

"Did Eric win it?" cried Mary, her dark eyes glowing.

Mild surprise revealed itself in Mr. Blagden's eyes,— surprise tinged with pity. You would have thought that the bare suggestion that Eric *might* have won over his son was a distinct shock to his nerves.

Mr. Presbrey smiled cheerfully for Eric's benefit, as much as to say it wasn't worth worrying over, or being disappointed about.

"Chetwynd won it, of course," announced Horace with some austerity. "It was the unanimous opinion of the judges that his designs were the best. Of course," he went on magnanimously, laying his hand on Eric's shoulder and turning to the Presbreys, "we will have to admit that Chetwynd had a decided advantage over the other contestants, among them Eric. His work at college and his private instructions gave him — er, ahem! — a rather unfair start, you might say. I spoke to the committee about it, but they called my objections absurd — er, ahem — or something of that sort. I have never felt that Chetwynd should —"

Mr. Presbrey took the liberty of interrupting him. This was an instance when Horace was not only likely to excuse an interruption but might even welcome it. So Mr. Presbrey rose to the occasion. He put in a tempering protest.

"My dear sir, put that thought from you, once and for all. Chetwynd was certainly as eligible as anyone. All is fair in — er — love and war. Ha, ha! Quite so, quite so! Ha, ha! You heard what Mr. Borden, of the committee, said. 'Amazingly clever and brilliant idea for a college boy, and well thought out.' Those were his very words. I made it a point to remember them so that I might repeat them to Mrs. Blagden."

Horace smiled benignly, and then permitted a cloud to cross his face. He squeezed Eric's shoulder in a consoling grip and said: "It's hard on you, Eric. If it hadn't been for Chetwynd, I am sure you would have carried off the honour. I can't help thinking that I should have kept your cousin out of the contest."

"It wouldn't have been right, sir," said Eric simply. He had swallowed hard before opening his mouth.

"I am sorry, Eric," went on his uncle, kindly.

Eric could hardly believe his senses. It was the first time he had heard that expression come from his uncle's lips. Somehow, it had never entered his head that Chetwynd's father could be sorry for anybody.

There were tears in Mary's eyes as they followed Mr. Blagden and his guests into the house. She pressed Eric's arm.

"I just *know* his design wasn't as good as yours, Eric," she whispered.

"Oh, I don't mind a bit, girlie," he said bravely, despite the sore disappointment in his heart. "It's all in a lifetime." A moment later, he muttered, more to himself than to her: "I wonder when he worked at the design. He read novels all the time, so far as I could tell."

"I suppose it will be on exhibition at the public library," said Mary, in grudging tones.

"I'll see it to-morrow."

Mrs. Blagden came down the stairway, dry-eyed and eager. Even as she shook hands with the Presbreys, she flashed a questioning glance at her husband.

"Did Chetwynd get it?" she asked.

"Certainly," replied Horace.

She beamed. "You must telegraph the news to him, Horace."

He playfully tapped her on the cheek with his slim, cool fingers. "I already have done so, my dear."

CHAPTER VII

THE BENDING OF HORACE BLAGDEN

LATE the next afternoon Horace received a telegram that puzzled him not a little. It was from Chetwynd. "Who won the prize? Wire me at the Holland as usual."

What puzzled Horace was this: what had become of the telegram addressed to his son at the Holland half an hour after the awarding of the prize the day before? But what would have puzzled anyone who knew Mr. Blagden at all well, was his action in sending a second telegram without inquiring at the telegraph office why the first had not been delivered. The thin line between the banker's eyes seemed to have deepened perceptibly after the receipt of his son's query. Somehow, he had the ugly notion that his first telegram was lying unclaimed at the hotel in New York.

Mr. Blagden usually left the bank at four in the afternoon. It was his practice, not to say habit, to walk up the street to his club,— the only one in town that a gentleman could enter without glancing over his shoulder in all directions,— there to read the Boston papers and engage in a subsequent game of cribbage with Colonel Harkweather, who also read the papers before doing anything else. On this particular afternoon, however, the Colonel not only read the Boston papers, but scanned the New York dailies and then took up the magazines. Finally he went home in fine disgust. It was the first time in months that Blagden had failed to appear. He was half-way-home before it occurred to him that the banker might be ill. So he entered a drugstore and telephoned to the house on the hill. He was not at all relieved to hear from Mrs. Blagden herself that Horace had never been in better health. If anything, the Colonel was more furious than before, considering himself a much abused man. He kept saying over and over again to himself that he was sorry Blagden was not ill: there was now no excuse at all for him that he could see.

But Horace sat at his desk much later than usual on this day, a troubled frown on his brow. He was not thinking of Chetwynd, as you might suppose,— at least, he was not devoting all of his thoughts to the boy. It seems there was a very grave cause for suspecting a former employé of dishonest practices during the last days of his employment in the bank. Within the past week, auditors in going over the books anticipatory to the appearance of the bank examiner, had unearthed discrepancies in the balances. There was a clearly defined shortage of nearly five thousand dollars, carried over for several months before coming to light. Careful investigation revealed the fact that the shortage was created about the time the assistant teller left the bank in order to make room for the president's son. The young man himself, one John Payson, after losing his position, secured work in the offices of a Building and Loan Society, upon the unqualified recommendation of Horace Blagden. He remained in the bank for a week after Chetwynd was installed, instructing him in the duties of office. As near as could be reckoned, the embezzlement occurred immediately before or during this week of instruction.

Nothing of the kind had happened before in the history of Blagden & Co. Not so much as a penny had been feloniously taken from its coffers, not in all the sixty years of the bank's existence. No wonder, then, that Horace was disturbed.

To think that he had employed a man who could stoop to theft! And to think that subsequently he had recommended him to a position of trust! It was most upsetting.

With a promptness that suggested panic, Mr. Blagden hired a New York detective and put him on the case. For a week or more, that worthy had been devoting his time and intelligence to a study of the past and present habits of the suspected young man, with the surprising result that, so far, he was unable to report to Mr. Blagden that they were anything but good. This, of course, convinced Horace that the fellow was an uncommonly clever rascal.

The detective was Adam Carr.

On this particular day, Mr. Blagden sat in his private office long after the hour for closing, aimlessly fingering the telegram he had received from his son, but intently considering the day's report from Adam Carr. It was beginning to enter his mind that Carr was not competent to handle a case so baffling as this appeared to be. He was wondering if it would not be a wise move to dismiss him and employ a Boston man who, it appears, had caught a very clever defaulter after chasing him for three years. But as Horace was a prompt man in everything, he was bound to admit that he was averse to hiring a man who was so slow as all that. He had talked it over with the cashier and three of the directors, and they had advised hiring the Boston man. That was another reason why he hesitated.

Carr's report for the day brought nothing new to his impatient mind. The ex-teller was behaving in a most circumspect manner. There was no evidence that he gambled, speculated, or kept a woman in New York. Payson had not visited New York in two years, so far as Adam Carr could learn, and Horace was forced to admit that if he had a paramour at all, she must be in New York. She *couldn't* be in Corinth.

The telephone on his desk rang. He put the receiver to his ear with mechanical precision and said: "Yes." The voice that came out of the little black tube was so loud and vibrant that his eye-lids twitched with pain; he held the receiver a little farther away. It always annoyed him to have anyone shout in his ear. A look of surprise followed immediately. Eric Midthorne was speaking.

"Yes, I am still here," replied Mr. Blagden. "What is it?" He listened for a moment to the strident, excited voice and then cut in with the curt remark: "It isn't necessary to shout. I can hear you. . . . Yes, I will wait here if it is important. But don't be long about it. Come up if you must see me."

Three minutes later Eric burst into the room without so much as a tap on the mahogany door.

"Dear me, Eric, is this the way to enter a room?" demanded Horace, in that mild tone of reproof that never failed to hurt more than a sharp reprimand.

Eric's face was as white as chalk. He came directly to the desk, but many seconds elapsed before he could force words through his twisted lips. Horace stared at the boy's convulsed face in actual surprise.

"Uncle Horace," began Eric hoarsely, "it was *my* drawing that took the prize. Do you know that? It was *my* drawing. I have just seen it."

Mr. Blagden's brow darkened; his grey eyes narrowed and seemed to turn black as coal.

"What are you saying?" he demanded.

Eric struck the desk a violent blow with his clenched fist. His eyes shot fire.

"It was my drawing! Chetwynd stole it!"

Horace opened his eyes very wide. A look that no one had ever seen in them before grew as he stared, with parted lips, at him who uttered those awful words. He closed his lips suddenly to hold back the gush of ice-water that seemed to fill his mouth. He swallowed, and the chill spread throughout his body. He did not realise it at the moment, but afterwards he was to recall that he was experiencing the first touch of a blighting fear from which he was never afterwards to be free: the fear of Chetwynd.

In an instant, he was himself again, a bit greyer than before perhaps, but quite as austere.

"What do you mean, sir, by striking my table in that manner? Try to govern yourself, sir, or leave the room." He chose to resent the boy's actions, rather than his words. Afterwards, in analysing his emotions, he came to acknowledge a shameful weakness in shrinking from the real attack.

"I swear, Uncle Horace, so help me God, that the drawing sent in by Chetwynd is the one I made. I have never seen the one that bears my name. I never drew it. Oh, it was a dirty trick! It was fiendish! Uncle, you've just got to straighten it out. He took my drawing. I don't know how or when, but it *is* mine that has his name on it over at the library."

Tears of rage and despair filled his eyes.

Mr. Blagden had himself well in hand by this time.

"You are making a very serious charge against your cousin, Eric," he said levelly. "I cannot permit you to go on in this way. You —"

"But it is true!" cried Eric wildly. "I swear it's true!"

"Do not interrupt me. Why should I believe what you say? How could Chetwynd have come into possession of your drawing? You kept it under lock and key; you presented it to the committee with your own hands, did you not? You would hardly go so far as to accuse the honourable judges of substituting one drawing for the other, of placing my son's name on your work, or allowing him to do so, if it could have gone that far."

"But it is my drawing and it has his name on it. It wasn't there when I submitted the design to Mr. Porter, the librarian."

"Do you consider this a sportsmanlike manner in which to take defeat?" demanded Horace sneeringly.

"I don't consider it a defeat, Uncle Horace," said Eric deliberately. "My drawing won the prize."

Mr. Blagden's stern gaze wavered ever so slightly.

"If you placed your drawing in Mr. Porter's hands, then what, may I ask, inspires you to make this deliberate charge against my son? It isn't likely he could have *wished* his name to appear upon it, to have it appear there as if by magic. This is not the age of Aladdin."

"I can't understand it any more than you, sir, but it is true, just the same," cried Eric doggedly. "Mr. Porter says that no one touched the drawings."

"Then, will you be good enough to tell me how Chetwynd could have done this thing you accuse him of doing?" demanded Mr. Blagden sternly.

"I think it was done before I submitted the drawing," said Eric.

"Oh," was his uncle's expressive comment.

"I wrapped it up carefully and put it in my drawer the day before I presented it. It was not unwrapped after that. Chetwynd was in my room that evening alone. Mary saw him there and he said he was looking for a scarf-pin I had taken from his room without permission. He — he told her I had no business going into his room, that he'd missed several things, and — and — well, he as much as said I'd taken things that didn't belong to me."

Horace smiled with grim derisiveness. "It is possible he had as much right to accuse you as you have to accuse him. It seems to me his case is as good as yours."

"I am not a thief!"

"He might say the same. Did he find the scarf-pin?"

Eric flushed. "He told her he found it. But he lied!"

"Eric!"

"*He lied!*"

Mr. Blagden's face grew deathly white and then turned purple. He sprang to his feet and advanced upon the boy, a furious glare in his eyes.

"You scoundrel! You vilifier! You unhung rascal! How dare you come to me with such a story as this?" He choked, he appeared to be strangling. Eric shrank back aghast. No one had ever heard a blasphemous word on the lips of Horace Blagden, but now Eric was to listen to a torrent of wild profanity that would have shocked even the walls of a ship's forecastle. He was seized with the fear that his uncle had gone mad, utterly mad.

"Uncle!" he cried, putting up his hands as if to shield himself from a blow.

"I could kill you where you stand, curse you," hissed the man. A great light broke in upon him. "Ah! Now I understand! Now I can see how a man justifies himself for taking another's life. By heavens, I know how sweet it would be to kill!" In his frenzy, he looked about for a deadly weapon.

Then, as suddenly, his whole manner changed. He fell back against the table, his jaw dropping, an expression of great horror crossing his face.

"Good God, help me!" he groaned, shaking as with the ague. "What is it I have said? What is it that is in my heart? Murder? Oh, my God!"

He would have fallen had not the boy leaped forward to catch him by the arm. Mr. Blagden shook him off. Eric fell away, moving toward the door, ready to flee from this amazing figure, this unknown being.

His uncle turned his sodden eyes upon him, and motioned with a trembling hand for him to stay.

"Stop! Don't run away. Wait, Eric. I — I ask you to wait here until — until I —" Whatever it was that he meant to say, the words were not uttered. Somehow Eric understood. He stood in the middle of the floor and watched his uncle stagger to the couch over against the wall, upon which he dropped as if every vestige of strength had deserted him.

The minutes passed slowly. The picture remained the same. The wondering, half-stupefied boy in the middle of the room; the motionless figure on the couch, from whose lips ever and anon came two hoarsely whispered words: "My God!"

The shadows of dusk crept into the room through the high windows; the waning light of the summer day looked in upon the strange tableau, and vague sounds from the street came but without the power to disturb. Somewhere, off in the deserted banking room, a watchman was shuffling about and whistling. Eric waited for him to open the door and break the spell that had fallen over the president's office. Nothing else, it seemed, could shake the fetters from his feet, or drive the warm blood back into his empty veins. Would the heavy-breathing figure on the couch never change its limp position? Would the hand never be drawn away from the eyes it covered?

At last, when the room had grown quite dark, Horace Blagden moved. The boy's tense figure relaxed so suddenly that his legs almost gave way.

" Answer the telephone, please," said Mr. Blagden, his voice calm once more, but weak.

The telephone had been buzzing for a minute or longer. Eric grabbed up the receiver.

" It is Aunt Rena," he said hazily. " She wants to know if you are ill,— why you are so late coming home, Uncle."

" Tell her I am all right and will be there at once."

He arose from the couch, taller, more gaunt than ever it seemed to Eric as he saw him through the gathering darkness.

" Eric," he said, from his position near the couch, " we will go home at once. Will you get my hat and cane from the closet? "

The boy hesitated. " I can't go home with you now, Uncle Horace. Not after what I've said to you."

There was another long period of silence. The man's eyes were half-closed.

" Eric," he said at last, abject weariness in his voice, " I am about to ask a great favour of you. Will you let this matter rest for awhile? I — I don't know what came over me. It was not like anything that ever has happened to me before, not in all my life. I seem to have gone utterly out of my head. Wait! Please do not speak. Listen to me. I am about to confess something to you. When you first came into this room and said that — that Chetwynd had taken your drawing, I felt that you spoke the truth. I do not know why I should believe this of my own son, but — but I was no more able to help it than it was in my power to check the working of my mind. The horrible fit of anger, — the dreadful language, I cannot explain. I do not understand it myself. Wait! Yes, I *do* understand. It was because I knew that *you* knew. It was because there was no one else on whom I could vent my rage and shame. I hated you, Eric, in those few moments, those awful moments. You will never know how I hated you. Perhaps you can understand why. I wanted to be proud of Chetwynd. You struck that pride a deadly blow. You were responsible for my awakening. I cried out as the sleeper does when he is rudely disturbed from the serenity of peaceful slumber — I cried out in anger against the awakening. I wanted to kill you. It was in my heart to do so. I love Chetwynd. He is all that life holds for me. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir," said Eric, still in a maze.

"It is not too late for me to save him. He shall *not* go down. By God, he *shall* be a man. I will lift him up, I will force him up. He shall not falter again. I have never failed in any undertaking. I will not fail in this. He must be absolved. There is no alternative. *He must stand right with the world, with me, and with himself.* Now, listen to me. Don't let a word escape you. I thought it all out as I lay there on the couch. *You* can ruin him, perhaps,— or at least cast discredit on him. It is my duty to prevent that very thing happening. You have got to let this matter rest."

"But, Uncle," began Eric.

Mr. Blagden came a few steps nearer. Even in the dim light Eric could see the exalted light in his eyes.

"There is no alternative. He must be spared, so that I may help him while my hand is strong, while my love is great and capable of generosity. I shall have to ask you to say nothing about this until I have talked it over with him. There may be some mistake. I may be wrong in my conclusions. God knows that I hope I am. I would give all that I possess if I could be sure that you have lied to me, if I could drive out of my mind that first revolting doubt. But it has taken root, the seed of distrust is well-sown. I doubt my son. I can only hope that his side of the story may not be so dark as I fear it is. There may be extenuating circumstances." A great hope took root in his soul, and he voiced it. "It is not improbable that *you* tried to profit by his ideas. You may be as culpable as he is, in an indirect way. Stop! Do not defend yourself. It isn't necessary. I am merely theorising. I recall that the two designs, as presented, are along the same general lines, the same thought is expressed. I noted a similarity. He may have been justified in keeping you from realising on his ideas and his experience. If he discovered in any way that you, being a better draughtsman than he, concluded to benefit by his ideas after coming into possession of them, either innocently or maliciously —"

Eric's indignation burst its bounds.

"You know that isn't true, Uncle Horace," he cried out. "I never saw his design, I never talked with him about it."

"What are you going to say if he declares that you *did* take —" began Mr. Blagden harshly.

But he could not deceive himself. He bit his lip and turned his face away for an instant.

"No, Eric," he went on, in an altered tone, "I won't put it that way. I am about to bare myself to you, and it is best that we should understand each other."

He paced back and forth across the room several times, his brow knitted, his hands clasped tightly behind his back.

Eric felt a sudden, keen sense of jubilation. "Are you going to have Mr. Presbrey talk it over with him?" he asked.

Mr. Blagden stopped in his tracks, and stared at the questioner.

"No," he said, bringing his lips together in a thin line. "This is not a matter for Presbrey — at least, not at present. My boy, I am desperate, quite desperate. I don't know why I should believe this thing you have told me, as I said before, but I do believe it. I am convinced that your drawing has won the prize that goes to Chetwynd. I don't know how it all came about. He may not have been wholly responsible, but the fact remains that the drawing is yours. I am a fair man. I grant that it *is* your design. But, above all things, I am a Blagden. The name has been dragged in the dust by one member of the family,— your mother. That, of course, is something you could not have helped. But you can help me now in the effort to keep it from being further dishonoured. I shall expect you to do so. It is hard, I appreciate, for you to sit back calmly and see the prize go to another under the conditions. But that, my boy, is *just what you will have to do.*"

He spoke slowly, emphasising each word with a sort of snapping of his tongue as the breath escaped from the confinement of his throat.

"What do you mean?" asked Eric, perplexed.

"Just this: the situation must remain as it is. You have nothing to lose, while I, your aunt, even Chetwynd — ah, we have so much to lose. But three people know of this, I fancy — we three. Unless — ah, but I am sure you could not have been such a fool as to say anything to Mr. Porter before consulting me. I can see by your face that you did not go so far as that."

"You mean," said Eric, in low, uneven tones, "that I am to let Chetwynd have the prize without a word for myself?"

"Yes. That, and nothing else."

"But I will not submit to —"

"You will do just as I say, sir," said his uncle calmly. "As I have said before, it is for the good of the family. We must think of that, you and I, as we —"

"Why should I think of *your* family?" cried Eric recklessly. "You've never thought of mine. You and Mr. Presbrey have read my mother and father into hell-fire. You haven't left me anything to be grateful for. I won't —"

"Stop, sir! Not another word. The cases are not parallel. We have a chance to save a boy's soul, as well as his honour. It was not *I* who damned Mary and Philip Midthorne. They saw to that well enough for themselves. But I did not mean to hurt you. Forgive me."

"I can't forgive everything," groaned the boy.

"You owe me a great deal more than you can ever realise. It was I, Eric, who took you and Mary by the hand and lifted you up from the dirt into which you were cast. It is I who have given you an honoured, a noble place in the world. And how? By means of a name that, of itself, stands unsullied. No man has ever questioned the name of Blagden. With that name to support you, you have become a credit and a — yes, a blessing to Corinth. That name will carry you to fields of greater honour and distinction. So long as it is behind you in the — er — you might say the flesh and blood, you have nothing to fear. I represent the name. I *am* the name. If I cast you off, the world will never pick you up. There you have it. Do I make myself clear?"

It did not occur to Eric to resent the sublime egotism in this speech. At any other time he would have snickered, perhaps, for he had a rare sense of humour, but now he could not fail to be impressed by the seriousness of his uncle's words.

"Am I to understand, Uncle Horace, that if I say anything about Chetwynd stealing my —"

"Don't use that word," snapped Mr. Blagden.

"If I mention *it*," modified the boy, "you will kick me out?"

"I will not have anyone about me who wilfully, deliberately seeks to destroy the credit of the name I bear," said the other, succinctly.

"How about Chetwynd?"

"Do you mean to argue all night with me?"

"I should have some rights, sir."

"You are too young to talk about rights. You will have them when the proper time comes. I will see to that. This little disappointment you've experienced to-day is but a trifle in the harvest of pleasures you may reap with my help and my friendship. Listen, Eric. I am very serious. I must insist that you look at this from my point of view. It means so much to me. It can mean very little to you. In a week, you will have forgotten the pangs of disappointment, while I could never hold up my head again in Corinth if you were to tell this story to the world. People would believe enough of it to make life a hell for me. I could not beat it down. It would never die. And Chetwynd's only chance would be gone. He *can* be saved. He *must* be saved. He is not a bad boy at heart. He — he has been spoiled."

The man's lip trembled, and his voice shook ever so slightly in the utterance of this humiliating confession.

It was on the point of Eric's tongue to blurt out the ugly tale of Chetwynd's treatment of Mary, but he held back the words. This was an affair between him and Chetwynd.

"It's hard, mighty hard, Uncle Horace," he said, dropping into a chair and putting his face in his hands.

"We all have hard duties to perform. We all have harsh debts to pay, my lad."

"What are you going to say to Chetwynd, if I do keep still? He will know that I know. It — it will be awkward."

"I shall demand of him the truth. I shall compel him to go to you and admit his — er — his error. You may —"

"I'd rather you'd not ask him to do that," objected Eric, in stifled tones. "It's best not to do it. Let it go as it is. Say what you like to him, Uncle, but don't let him come to me about it. I'll — I'll let it stand as it is, but I won't have anything more added to it. That's what it would mean if he tried to apologise. We couldn't get through with it gracefully, that's all."

Mr. Blagden placed his hand on the bent shoulder of the defeated boy.

"I am glad that you see it as you should see it, Eric.

You have taken the proper course, believe me. I shall not forget it. It is understood, then, that — er, ahem! — that it goes no farther?"

"Yes, sir. I'll stand for it," in muffled tones.

The telephone bell tinkled once more. Eric waited until his uncle motioned for him to take the message.

His aunt was on the wire, asking what kept them at the bank. He informed her they were starting for home at once. Then she said something that brought a bitter, scornful smile to his lips. He waited until she was through, and then said:

"No, it isn't that. Don't be worried, Aunt Rena."

"Will you get my hat and stick now? We will be late for dinner. Punctuality is a virtue, Eric, that is only surpassed by unselfishness. Ah, thank you."

He accepted his hat and cane from the hands of his nephew, carefully placing the one on his grey head and grasping the other firmly.

"Smith will straighten up the room. He must be wondering what keeps me here so late. It is quite dark. Dear me, Smith *must* be puzzled. By the by, Eric, I may go to Boston this week. It has occurred to me that I can, after all, arrange to take the room you want, — I might say covet,— in Cambridge for next fall. You remember I told you a few weeks ago it wouldn't be possible on account of the expense. Well, I think it can be arranged."

"Thank you, Uncle," said Eric, rather lifelessly.

They passed out of the building and descended the broad stone steps leading to the sidewalk. Street lamps were being lighted by men who made a pretence of hurrying up and down the quiet thoroughfare. Corinth was still using the primitive gas-lamp on its streets, although the world at large had been illuminated by electricity for years. It seems that Blagden et al. owned the lighting franchise for the town, and they believed in letting well-enough alone. At least, until they could get their price from the outside capitalists who were ready to put in a big electric plant. The Corinth Electric Light Company supplied the homes and the business houses with light, but the municipality was content, perforce, to cling to its ancient friend, the lamp post,—staid and trusted teetotaler that never went out nights.

Uncle and nephew walked side by side up the narrow sidewalk, homeward bent. They were silent after that last magnanimous effort on the part of Horace, each wrapped in his own thoughts, not any of which possibly could have been pleasant. Eric found some satisfaction in the discovery of a weak spot in his uncle's virtue, although the consolation afforded by this knowledge was not likely to provide a lasting sense of victory. His uncle contaminated! An hour before he would not have believed it possible. But now! Where would it end? How far would an ill-wind carry that hitherto unswerving craft out of its established course? What was Horace Blagden's estimate of himself to be as time gave it a chance to develop?

As for the tall, gaunt man who strode beside him, what were his thoughts? What must they have been, to drag down his shoulders in this way and to lower a chin that never had drooped before?

They entered the gate in the stone wall guarding the sanctity of the grey house on the hill. Not until then did Horace Blagden give sign of the thoughts that were burning in his brain. He stopped, checking Eric with a word.

"It *did* seem to me, Eric, on seeing the two drawings, that the one bearing your name was crudely done.

I could not understand it. I was amazed, and I must say I was gratified. Now I understand. You could not possibly have made the design attributed to you. But the thing that puzzles me most, is how Chetwynd, with his training and his extra preparation for the contest, could have produced such a miserable botch. He has had the best of instruction in New York. I — I can't see why he did not do better."

Eric had his own private opinion, but he could not bring himself to the point of advancing it at this time. Mr. Blagden would find out soon enough, without his help. Still, the boy could not quell the secret joy that filled his soul as he contemplated the harsh times ahead of Chetwynd, and the bitter things that his uncle and aunt would have to swallow. The thought of this actually revived his fallen spirits. The future would pay handsomely for the present; he could afford the gloom of to-day in view of to-morrow's glory.

"Perhaps he didn't consider it worth while," he explained.

Horace eyed him sharply. "If he didn't consider it worth while, why should he have gone to the trouble to — But, there, we were to say no more about it. He shall explain for himself. We can't judge him unheard."

They went forward. As they came into the shaft of light thrown out by the open hall door, the older man again stopped. This time he grasped Eric's arm in a grip of iron.

"Eric," he began in a low, tense voice, "you heard me say back there in the office that I could have killed you. Will you be able to appreciate my state of mind when I tell you now that it was in my heart to kill you if you refused to accede to my demands in this matter?

There is a revolver in my desk drawer. You were not to have gone out with that awful story on your lips. But that is not all. It would have died there in that room, for no one would been alive to repeat it."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Eric, a strange chill running through him. He looked up into the haggard face of his uncle as it stood out clearly in the light from the doorway. It seemed to him that Mr. Blagden suddenly had grown very old.

"I should have killed myself as well," said Horace Blagden quietly.

The boy stared at him in utter amazement. Suddenly it was revealed to him what all this really meant to the head of the Blagden family. He was conscious of a choking sensation in his throat; there was a rush of moisture to his eyes. A great, perhaps unwelcome wave of pity for the man swept over him.

"It's all right now, Uncle," he murmured brokenly.

As they entered the hall, Mrs. Blagden emerged from the library. She sent a swift, searching glance into Eric's eyes, a glance expressing doubt, anxiety and no little antipathy.

Eric smiled, a bitter, scornful little smile, the real inwardness of which she was never to grasp.

He could account for her uneasiness. He had but to go back for a few minutes to that second call on the telephone. She had said to him then, in accents of real despair and dread:

"You are not telling him of Chetwynd and Mary, are you? You can't be such a beast, such a dog as to forget your promise to me. If I thought you were telling him, I'd turn Mary out into the street this very minute, because I know your uncle would insist on it himself when he got home. Have you breathed it to him? Speak! Why do you hesitate?"

"No, it isn't that. Don't be worried, Aunt Rena," he had said.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN FRIENDSHIP CEASES

Chetwynd returned from New York two days later. He was closeted with his father for more than two hours, emerging with the air of a whipped dog, thoroughly cowed, but filled with rage against Eric Midthorne and his own father. A hang-dog look of defiance crept into his sullen face as the hours went by, hours that were bringing him up to the minute when he would have to face Eric in the library, just before the dinner hour, in accordance with the edict pronounced by his father.

The two young men came face to face at six o'clock, just as Horace had planned they should do. It was part of Chetwynd's expiation that he should confess himself to Eric. They were to have no listeners, no witnesses. Eric was surprised, a trifle dismayed, when they came upon each other, to all appearances in an accidental manner.

Chetwynd's method of acknowledging his deed was characteristic of him, but hardly what Mr. Blagden, in his justice, intended. He came close to Eric, his clenched hands stuffed deep in his trousers' pockets, his lower jaw protruding and his heavy brows drawn tightly together.

"You infernal sneak! You son of a — No, Father particularly requested me not to use that word, so I won't say it. But you know what I mean."

That was his way of confessing.

Eric simply grinned, and turned away, leaving his big cousin more impotently furious than he ever had been in his life.

The next morning, Eric came upon Adam Carr in a most unexpected manner. That dour-faced individual was seated on Judge Bright's front porch when the young man appeared there to ask Joan to let him take snap-shots of her with the new camera his aunt had just given to Mary. Chetwynd had been commissioned to buy it in New York. Mary had cried over it, and, in the privacy of the back hall, declared to Eric that she would never use it because it would show them that her silence was purchaseable.

"Well!" Eric cried out to Adam Carr. "When did you get back?"

Adam's sour smile appeared and faded in a breath. "Why don't you ask the question you really meant to ask?" he demanded amiably. "What am I doing here? That's your question. Well, I'm sitting here. Now I'll answer one you just put to me. I got back yesterday, on the eleven-ten."

"That's the train Chetwynd came on."

"Did he?" asked Adam politely, but without interest.

"He has been in New York."

"Strange I didn't run across him there. New York's such a small burg. You're always seeing people you know. I hope you've not come up to take Miss Joan out for another swim."

"I should say not! No more of that for me."

"Judge Bright's at home. I fancy he'd put in a kick."

"Are you waiting to see him?"

"No."

"Oh?" somewhat dashed.

"He's waiting to see me."

"*He*'s waiting? I don't understand. Where?"

"That is, he's waiting for me to put in an appearance."

"Well? You're here, aren't you?" asked Eric blankly.

"Yes, but he doesn't know it. He's waiting for me to ring the door bell. But I saw you coming along behind me, so I thought I'd stop and say howdy to you. How does your sister like her camera?"

Eric started. "How did you know she had a new camera?"

"It came from Baxter's, it cost twenty-seven dollars, and it has her initials stamped in gold on the inside of the box."

Eric opened "the box" as he called it, and looked inside. He saw the initials for the first time. They were so minute he could hardly distinguish them. He whistled in astonishment.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he gasped, looking at the man in genuine wonder.

"You thought it cost sixty, didn't you?"

"That's what it did cost," cried the other. "Aunt Rena told me so. You missed fire that time."

"Who told her it cost sixty?"

"She gave Chetwynd sixty — By George! I see! He — he kept the balance?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it just that way," said Adam softly. "He couldn't keep something he didn't have."

"Don't speak in riddles," cried Eric.

"He had just thirty dollars when he went into Baxter's. I daresay he kept the three dollars for a cab and breakfast on the train. He couldn't keep the extra thirty, for the simple reason that someone else was keeping it for him."

"What the dickens —"

"Now don't resort to profanity. It's a very bad habit for one to get into," said Adam, with tantalising seriousness.

With unseemly abruptness Eric sat down beside him on the porch seat. His eyes glowed with a great light of understanding as he gripped Adam Carr's sturdy leg in his eager fingers, and almost whispered the question:

"I say, Mr. Carr, were you shadowing Chetwynd?"

Adam appeared distinctly amazed.

"Well, well! What put that into your head?"

"Why should you be watching him?" demanded the other, tremendously excited.

"I wasn't watching him," said Mr. Carr, severely. "I just happened to be in Baxter's at the time. I couldn't help hearing the conversation. I repeat your question: Why should I be watching him? Has he done anything wrong?"

Eric was baffled. Suddenly he renewed the assault.

"Then why did you say someone else was keeping the money for him?" he demanded shrewdly.

Adam's face became positively sphinx-like. He looked out over the mass of rose bushes on the lawn.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" cried Eric.

"Well, some day I may tell you one," announced Adam in his most confidential manner.

"Oh, pshaw!"

"You can begin keeping it right now. There's more to come. Don't repeat this conversation."

"But can't you tell me something —"

"No. You see, it's a secret. I never tell secrets so long as they *are* secrets. I'm like you in that respect."

The expression on Eric's face betrayed the groping of his mind after a vague, indefinite thought that had flitted across his inner vision like a flash of light. It came and swiftly passed but it left an impression that developed into something tangible with a suddenness that caused him to gasp.

"By George!" he cried, searching the inscrutable face with gleaming eyes. "Uncle Horace hasn't set you to watching Chetwynd, has he?"

"*I — should — say — not!*" exclaimed Adam Carr, with an amazed look at the questioner. It was his turn to be puzzled. Mr. Carr was never surprised. "Why should *he* want to have him watched?"

Eric caught the cunning, eager gleam in the man's eyes, and hesitated. There was something back of all this that he could not understand, and he began to feel the wisdom of keeping a close tongue in his head. After all, who was Adam Carr? What were his secret motives?

"I just asked, that is all," he said quickly. The other merely grunted.

"I guess I'll ring the bell now," he said, arising a moment later. Eric started to ask another question, but thought better of it. He looked at the sturdy back and thick neck of the man who pulled the bell-knob, and thought not of a bull-dog, but of a bloodhound. There was something cruel and relentless in the back of the strange man, in keeping with the face of him. The boy experienced the sudden, uncanny sensation of an enduring closeness to Adam Carr, as if he had known him intimately, in some form or another, all his life, and always would know him.

Oddly enough, and concurrent with the strange impression, Adam turned after pulling the bell and said:

"I like you. We'll be good friends for a long time, mark my word. Long as we both shall live, I hope."

Judge Bright himself came to the door in response to the tinkling of the bell.

"Ah, Carr," he said, "I've been waiting for you. Good morning, Eric."

He came out to the porch and shook hands with the youth, but did not offer to do the same with Adam Carr. Eric noticed the omission and wondered. All thought of it was driven from his mind an instant afterward, when Judge Bright, still clasping his hand, bent his head slightly forward and looked with searching intentness into his eyes. For a moment the great jurist appeared to be studying the boy's face as if it were something in which he sought to discover a flaw. Then, the hand pressure was renewed, more warmly than before, and the eyes of the Justice grew kind and generous as he said, positive relief in his voice:

"You'll find Joan in my study, Eric."

His manner puzzled the young fellow not a little. He had the feeling that this great judge of men had acquitted him of crime, as he might have passed judgment on a prisoner in the dock after hearing insufficient evidence against him. What could it all mean? Vaguely disturbed in his mind, he entered the house, leaving the two men on the porch. Looking back, he saw them descend the steps and walk slowly across the lawn toward a stone bench in the shade of the vine-covered wall.

"Hello," he said as he entered the Judge's study, addressing the girl in pink, who sat in the window seat looking out over the lawn. Her attitude was one of extreme pensiveness. She sat with her elbow on the window ledge, her chin in her hand, one leg curled up under her, one small foot and ankle hanging free. She started as if aroused from a dream.

"Oh," she cried, "it's you. I didn't hear you come in."

"I've been chatting on the porch with — I say, Joan, what is Adam Carr doing here? What's up?" He crossed the room and stopped beside her. She hesitated, and then made room for him on the seat. He was struck by the wistful, inquiring expression in her tender eyes.

"I don't know, Eric. I wish I did," she said. "Father sent for him this morning. I — I —" She looked away, undecided, and then returned her gaze to meet his questioning eyes. "Eric, Mrs. Blagden was here yesterday afternoon with Mrs. Presbrey. They talked to me about — about that night we spent on the reef. I — I think Mr. Carr is here to see father about it."

His brow clouded. "What could they have to say about that night?" he demanded.

She found it difficult to reply at once. When she spoke it was in low tones, suggestive of tears that had come and gone.

"Mrs. Presbrey came expressly to tell me that it was very wrong to have gone out sailing with you, and that — that people are talking about us. She said the only way to stop the — the talk was for us to have nothing more to do with each other."

He was silent for a long time, cold to the marrow.

"Nothing more to do with each other?" he repeated, slowly.

"Your aunt said she felt in duty bound to warn me against too close an intimacy with — with Mary. She said —"

"What!" He began to see things blood red before his eyes. "What!" he almost shouted.

"I don't believe a word she said. I am only telling you, so that you may know," she cried hastily, alarmed by the expression in his eyes. "She said it was the most humiliating thing she ever had to do in all her life, but that her conscience and her love for me prompted her to tell me that Mary is not always what she should be. She said she could never forgive herself if I fell into her ways, unsuspectingly. Oh, yes, and she said that she and your uncle were doing all in their power to curb a hereditary tendency to — Eric!"

He had sprung to his feet with a moan of rage and despair, clapping his hands to his eyes as if to shut out some horrid, devilish sight.

"Oh, Eric, I shouldn't have told you," she cried tremulously.

"My poor little Mary, my little angel Mary," he groaned. Suddenly he dropped down beside her again, clutching her hand in both of his. "Joan, I'll — I'll do something dreadful to that woman. I'll kill her. I'll make her pay for this. She's a liar. I'm going to take Mary away. I won't let her stay in that cursed house any longer. Why — why, she's as good as gold, Mary is. She hasn't an evil thought in her whole being. You know that, Joan, don't you? She loves you better than anybody in the world. Why should that devil of a woman try to hurt her like this? I don't see —"

"Eric, listen! What she said to me will never change my love for Mary. I told her so. You must think it cruel in me to have told you, but there is a reason. She said they were going to send Mary off to a private boarding school — to Miss Lex's. You know what sort of a place it is. People send girls there when they can't manage them at home. It's like a reform school, a place for incorrigibles. Oh, Eric, she must not be sent to that dreadful school."

He set his jaw after the first spasm of dismay had gone out of his face.

"She'll not go there," he said, clenching his hands until the nails hurt the flesh. "I know a way to stop that little scheme."

His soul glowed with triumph. He was thinking of the blow he could strike in return, a harrowing blow at the very heart of Blagden pride.

Joan went on with nervous haste, purging her mind of all that oppressed it. "Mrs. Presbrey said she hoped no one would ever hear that I removed my shoes and stockings. People wouldn't overlook such immodesty. Why, Eric, *you* didn't think I was doing wrong at the time, did you?" She was blushing.

"Mrs. Presbrey is a narrow-minded jay," was his specific rejoinder.

"Your aunt went on to say that Mr. Blagden was coming up this afternoon to assure father he wouldn't consider it a personal affront if he forbade you coming to see me, as you've been doing since we got home safely from Eddy's Islands."

Eric's smile was a grim one. "I'll bet my head he doesn't come," he said. "See here, Joan, what is it you are trying to get at? Don't *you* want me to come? Are you afraid to be seen with me?"

"No, no!" she cried. "You know better than that."

"Then you *do* like to have me come?"

"Of course, I do. That is, if you care to come." The last was a maidenly after-thought.

"I'm awfully keen about you, Joan," he said, a warm flush mantling his cheek. The remark seemed to put an effective curb on conversation. Neither could think of anything to say, and one of those silences ensued in which the heart-beats are painfully loud and the flesh creeps in delicious dread.

"Father is very fond of you," she said at last, with an effort.

"I've always thought you didn't like me," he said, ignoring her remark. "You seemed to despise me, up to the day we went sailing."

"How perfectly silly!"

"Well, you did," he insisted doggedly.

"I don't like you a bit more now than I ever did," she said calmly.

It was an ambiguous confession and he did not grasp it at once.

"I — I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Well, it's the truth," she asseverated, conscious of a thrill of satisfaction in her own cleverness.

He could think of nothing better to do than to shrug his shoulders, and deliberately change the subject.

"Well, leaving me out of it, are you going to cut Mary?"

"How can you ask?" she cried indignantly. "I love her."

His face brightened. "Good! Just you be nice to her, and I'll — I'll die for you. Don't let 'em turn you against her. And say, she isn't going to Miss Lex's, remember that."

"You are not going to take her away?" she cried in alarm.

"Oh, but I'd like to," he exclaimed. "I must think of a way. We can't stay there. I won't have her insulted by —"

"Eric, listen to me," she said earnestly. Her dark, serious eyes were full of compassion, but in their depths there was something that steadied him. "You must not do anything rash. There is too much at stake. You can't afford to take Mary away from — from a home, no matter how unpleasant it may be for her now."

"But I will be in college next winter," he groaned. "Who will there be then to protect her from — them?" He was about to say Chetwynd, for his cousin had been uppermost in his thoughts all the time. "Joan, it's getting too hard to bear. I'm almost a man. I can look out for her any place in the world. I'll give up college and work for her. I'll work in the streets if that will —"

"And you might compel her to take to the streets, too," she said. The worldliness of this sage remark caused him to stare hard at her.

"You don't think that?"

She veered. "Let me tell you what I am going to propose to Mrs. Blagden. I am going to ask her to let Mary go to the Sinnox school with me next winter. It is lovely there."

"By George, that would be great!"

"We could room together. I know she can get in if Mr. Blagden writes to Miss Drake, the principal. Mary's nearly sixteen. If Mrs. Blagden only will consent."

Eric struck his knees with his clenched fist to emphasise his next remark. "She'll consent, all right. She'll just have to. That's a great idea, Joan, and it's fine of you to think of it." He heaved a sigh of relief. "It will make things easier all around. I've been worried half to death about leaving her."

"But you must give up the thought of taking her away with you," she said earnestly. "I have been afraid that you might really run away sometime. You must not do that, Eric. I couldn't bear it."

"Why — why, you are crying," he exclaimed.

"I couldn't bear it," she sobbed. Still he did not recognise the true motive behind all her distress and anxiety. He could not see the heart of her as it lay swimming in the moist, tell-tale eyes. He only knew that she loved Mary. "Don't mind me," she said, drying her eyes and smiling. "I'm so silly."

"Oh, if I only could tell you — if I dared to —" he stammered in the despair of wild adoration.

Like a sensitive animal, she took alarm, and shrank back into the corner of the window seat. Her instinct told her that there was danger in the air,— the joyous danger she courted but still was afraid to face.

"You are the prettiest girl in the world," he went on, "and the nicest," he added hastily, fearful of the way she would take the outburst.

She frowned,— a very pretty frown, but desolating. He took it to be a sign of her displeasure. He had gone too far. He had offended her. Did he but know it, however, there would have been no frown if the last three words had been left unsaid.

Joan, from her position, saw her father and Adam Carr leave the stone bench and walk together toward the front gate.

"Mr. Carr is going," she said, singularly interested in what was going on out-of-doors. He leaned forward to look, and accidentally their hands touched.

They drew them apart as if each had come in contact with a burning coal. They laughed convulsively, in apology.

"He's a strange man," said Eric hastily, covering his confusion. Then his face clouded. "I say, your father looked at me in a mighty strange way out there. Just as if I had been doing something I shouldn't have done."

She hesitated, uncertain whether to add to his distress of mind or to complete what she had set out to do in the beginning.

"Your aunt told him yesterday that she is afraid of you, Eric," she blurted out wrathfully. "She says you once tried to kill Chetwynd, and that sometimes she catches a — a murderous look in your eyes when she offers even the slightest reproof or advice."

Eric laughed. He was able now to enjoy the situation. "They expect me to slaughter someone before I die," he chuckled.

"She was very serious about it," protested Joan, displeased by his levity. "She says that Mr. Presbrey works with you by the hour, trying to — Please don't laugh!" she cried, pouting. "I shan't tell you anything more."

"I can't help laughing," he said. "Don't begrudge me the chance to laugh at Mr. Presbrey. Why, Joan, he gets me off in a corner and prays over me as if I were the original sheep that was lost from the other ninety and nine. I'm half-way to the bad place all the time, according to him, and he's in a continual scrap with the devil over my remains. But I have good news for you: Mr. Presbrey says I've got a splendid chance to get into heaven in spite of all that. All I have to do is to follow him. He'll get me in, slick as a whistle. He's going to get Mary in, too. He's got Uncle Horace and Aunt Rena waiting at the gate right now. All they have to do to get in is to die. Chetwynd, too."

"You shouldn't scoff," she cried, but smiled in spite of the reproof.

"Well, I'm glad that your father doesn't believe I'm as bad as they make me out," he said soberly. "He — he shook hands with me twice out there, and told me I'd find you here. That shows what *he* thinks of me."

Her face brightened, a glorious light suffused her eyes, her lips parted in a warm, glad smile.

"Oh, I am *so* glad, Eric. I — I was afraid he might be prejudiced against you. You know how much store he sets by Mr. Blagden. And he can be very hard when he wants to be. He — he has to be heartless sometimes, my father does."

Eric returned her smile with one equally enveloping. Suddenly the shackles of fear and self-restraint fell away from him. His heart leaped up and in one swift rush overcame the timid brain that stood in its way. It swept all resistance aside and triumphed over reason. The look in her warm, sweet eyes did the work. With a half-cry, he slipped from the seat and sprang to her side. Before either really knew what had happened his arms were around her and he had kissed her, eagerly, bravely, full upon the lips.

"Oh, Joan, Joan," he whispered. She did not move, but closed her eyes, and appeared to have stopped breathing. Then he felt a dreadful fear stealing over him. As the chill of shame and remorse began to creep over him, the slender body quivered in his arms, and her hand caught one of his as it was about to be withdrawn. She convulsively pressed it to her lips. Then her eyes opened and looked into his. Tears swam in them as he looked down, dazed and unbelieving.

"Eric, Eric," she whispered, so softly, so timidly that he could hardly hear the word. "You dear, dear Eric."

He was dumb with joy. His lips moved, but the words remained smothered in his throat. She turned her head on his breast and began to cry softly. Physical expression of love was new and bewildering to them. They were amazed, frightened, abashed.

"Are — are we going to be sweethearts?" he asked, out of the maze of strange sensations. He only knew, or felt, that something vital was expected of him in this wonderful moment, something decisive, and honourable, and exacting. Her hand-clasp tightened with involuntary fervour. She hid her shamed face more completely in its resting place, and a delicious pink covered her cheek and the little ear that was left exposed. He repeated the question, almost breathless with the eagerness that filled his soul, tingling from head to foot with the exquisite agony of a joy that was growing so full and commanding that he could understand it, even as he doubted his senses.

The faintest nod of the head answered him. He caught his breath, striving to find an outlet for his feelings. The words came in a whisper:

"I — I've had dreams, but they were never like this. Oh, I've dreamed it a thousand times. I never thought it could be real. Are you sure, Joan? It isn't because I'm so strong you — you can't get away, is it? You are not angry —"

"No, no! I — I'm not angry, Eric," she cried softly. "Oh, I'm so ashamed. You — you don't think I'm bold and —"

He kissed her again, triumphantly. The eternal man in him was solving the problem. Victory! Conquest! That is the man of it.

"I didn't believe it could ever happen," he cried, aglow with bliss. "I — I don't see how I ever got up the courage to do it. Why, until now, I thought you liked me just on Mary's account. What funny things girls are. And you've been liking me,— like this,— all the time?"

"Not like this," she said wistfully, looking up for the first time and meeting his eyes. "I'd never thought of this."

"We'll be sweethearts forever,—" he hesitated and then uttered the word for the first time, shyly, awkwardly,—"darling."

"If you will always like me," she murmured.

"You won't let anybody come between us, will you?" he demanded. "You'll not let them change you with their stories about me?"

"As if they could!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Eric, you must not do that! Suppose that father came in, or one of the maids. Please, please!"

"I'm so happy I can't help — That reminds me, Joan." He took his arms from around her and stood erect, his face very serious.

"I've got to speak to your father," he announced, but with an utter absence of determination. "A gentleman never asks a girl to marry him until he's seen —"

She started up, all a-flutter. "I — I haven't said I'd marry you," she cried. "You haven't asked me. We're too young to talk about —"

"There you go!" he cried bitterly.

"You mustn't be foolish, Eric," she pleaded. "Don't tell father, not just yet. He would laugh at us. And he might put a stop to everything,— to our seeing each other and all that. Don't you see? There's plenty of time. It is all going to be so sweet and dear, to love each other in secret,— just between ourselves, with no one to say whether we may or may not. You — you might spoil everything by going to him. Goodness, I hope he didn't peep in here a minute ago!" She was in a great state of trepidation.

For that matter, so was Eric. He glanced toward the door with considerable anxiety.

"Perhaps — perhaps it's best to do as you say," he admitted in some haste. "Not that I'm afraid, of course, but — well, it might spoil everything right at the beginning. Your father just couldn't understand."

She clasped his arm in her eagerness. "It will be so lovely to have this beautiful secret all to ourselves," she cried, in guarded tones.

"But we *are* — engaged, aren't we? Say we are, Joan," he pleaded.

"Yes, yes," she half-whispered.

"And you'll marry me some day? Swear it!"

"Oh, Eric, it — it seems so unusual."

"You will?"

"I — I suppose so."

He was not satisfied. Men never are. His brow clouded with the darkness of jealousy.

"And you won't have a thing to do — ever — with any other fellow? Promise, Joan."

"Of course I won't," she cried, and he was content.

"Aunt Rena's got her heart set on you for Chetwynd," he said, suddenly conscious of another agreeable triumph over his aunt.

"I hate him." After a moment she went on, her brow clouded with annoyance. "She says Chetwynd wants me to join their excursion down the St. Lawrence next week. She's giving it for him and there will be five or six of us."

"It's the first I've heard of it," he said stolidly.

She flushed painfully. "Mrs. Blagden didn't — that is, you and Mary were not mentioned."

"We wouldn't go, anyway," he cried hotly.

"It's too bad," she murmured plaintively. "The trip is a lovely one."

"Are you going?"

"Father says it would be nice if I — but I won't go if you don't want me to."

He was fair and generous. "You must go, Joan. I won't mind. I'm — Hello! There's Judge Bright in the hall."

When Judge Bright entered the study a minute later, the sound of his footsteps having warned them in good time, he found Eric sitting on the edge of a table at some distance from Joan. If he observed the suppressed excitement in their manner, he gave it no thought, while they, on the other hand, were miserably certain that their heart-throbs betrayed them.

The Justice's grave, dignified face wore an expression of profound thought, which lightened materially as the girl called out to him to come over and sit in the window with her while Eric tried out the new camera on them.

"Snap us in this posture, Eric," he said genially, sitting down beside her and drawing the dark head to his shoulder.

Her eyes were sparkling. Eric nervously began fumbling with the camera. His fingers were all thumbs. She laughed and he made more of a mess than ever.

"The light's bad," he floundered helplessly. "Can't we go out in the yard?"

"I'm afraid I can't spare the time," announced the Judge. His brow clouded. "And I shall have to ask you two to let me have the study to myself for awhile. I've an important matter to — er — to think over. I'd spoil the picture, anyway." He arose, patting the restraining hand as he did so. "By the way, Eric, is Chetwynd at the bank to-day?"

"I think so, sir," replied the boy, repressing a start.

"Joan, before you go out, will you telephone and ask him if he would mind coming up this evening after dinner,— if he isn't otherwise engaged?"

Her face fell. "I'd — I'd rather not telephone to Chetwynd, Father."

Her father smiled. "Just tell him that I want to see him for a few minutes. Put it that way, my dear."

She went to the telephone in the hall, rebellious but relieved. The Judge turned to Eric, who stood hard by, undecided what to do next.

"I've known Adam Carr since he was a little boy, Eric. I saved him from drowning when we were lads together. You may be sure he would accept no thanks from me for what he did last week for Joan — and you. He is extremely fond of you, because you are good to his old father. And let me tell you something, my boy: he is a friend worth having."

"I am sure of it, sir."

"Chetwynd will be here at half-past seven, Father," said Joan from the doorway, a moment later.

CHAPTER IX

TRAGEDY

As Eric walked springily down Blagden Avenue an hour later, his heart thumping with happiness, he came face to face with Mr. Presbrey. In a twinkling his spirits fell. The sight of the excellent gentleman brought him back to earth. He had been in heaven for two hours or more. Strange, that a minister of the gospel should snatch one out of heaven and restore him to the sinful earth so rudely, but that is precisely what happened. Seeing Mr. Presbrey just then was like taking a sudden, unexpected plunge into icy water. Beautiful, warm vistas of delight faded away, and in their place stretched all the ugly, unkind scene he had managed to forget in his new environment. Once more came into active reality the bitter, depressing chill he had shaken off for the moment. Mr. Presbrey's friendly, spiritual smile at once suggested a hundred bitter wrongs and heart-aches; disillusioning realities, cruel charges and spiteful innuendoes. It revived all the mental anguish of the past fortnight, to say nothing of the indignities that had been spread out over the whole of his life with the Blagdens. The world turned black and harsh for him in the flash of an eye. Across his horizon lay the shadows of Chetwynd and his mother, with the less sinister shape of his uncle behind them.

Mr. Presbrey accosted him, halting as the young man came up. He planted the ferule of his gold-headed ebony cane firmly in a crack in the brick sidewalk, and said:

"Ah, you will be late for luncheon, my dear friend." He glanced at his watch. "It's half after one."

It occurred to Eric, and not for the first time, that Mr. Presbrey seldom missed the opportunity to censure him, even though he meant to be kindly and considerate.

"Yes, Mr. Presbrey," he said quietly, "I am afraid so. I must be hurrying along."

"You shouldn't keep your aunt waiting," said Mr. Presbrey genially, lifting his cane high enough to poke it at the youth in playful reproof.

(Chetwynd, who now and then uttered something pointedly original, once remarked that Mr. Presbrey carried a cane so that occasionally he could be in touch with the earth.)

Eric hurried on. He looked back once, with a frown on his face, taking in Mr. Presbrey's stiff back as that gentleman moved off up the street. Mr. Presbrey looked back in the same instant.

"He's always looking to see if I'm in the narrow path," thought Eric, rancour in his soul.

He and Mary spent the greater part of the sultry afternoon on Stone Wall, where she dawdled over a novel while he tried to concentrate his mind on one or two studies that had been haunting him since the spring examinations. But his thoughts were of other things, both harsh and pleasant. Thoughts, delicious thoughts of Joan were uppermost in his mind. Then, there was the cruel disappointment in connexion with the prize, of which Mary was in ignorance. She had not seen his drawing. He had not told her of Chetwynd's foul trick. He could not, in justice to himself, relate the story of his amazing interview with their uncle, nor would his tender heart allow him to repeat the unkind news he had obtained through Joan. He secretly was debating in his mind the wisdom of revealing Joan's rosy plans for the coming school-year. Persistent reminders of Adam Carr's strange words and his even more mysterious attitude also forced their way through the labyrinth of thoughts that confused and distressed him.

At last, in a burst of confidence — perhaps it was pity he felt for the sweet-faced girl who sat beyond him all unconscious of the fact that he watched her with troubled eyes,— he told her of Joan's plan, but emphatically enjoined silence on her part for the time being. Mary was in ecstasies. She forgot her book and her troubles, and he laid aside his own affairs while they discussed hopes, possibilities and obstacles.

Toward evening they strolled homeward, both wrapped in the cloak of optimism that lies only on the shoulders of youth. Arriving at the upper gate to the Seaman's Home on Lord's Point, they paused to shed some of their effulgent warmth on ancient Mr. Carr, whose sunset was clouded.

The old man was feeding the squirrels; a dozen of them scampered about his feet, or clambered over his person in frank security. A certain listlessness marked the old man's movements. The sprightliness was gone from the wrinkled, nut-brown face. He delivered the peanuts in a dreary, disinterested way, and forgot his erstwhile cheerful cluck.

"Hello," called out Eric from the gate. The old man looked up. His face lighted in an instant.

"Come in," he called out to them. "Where have you two been a-keepin' yourselves for the last week?" he demanded irascibly, as they approached. He scattered the nuts broadcast and arose to welcome his visitors.

The cause of his depression was revealed: he had missed these cheery young sprites, and he had been lonely.

"Did you miss us, Uncle Jabe?" asked Mary penitently.

"You're a pair of derned ingrates," announced Jabez sourly, belying the joy that shone in his sharp little eyes. "I might 'a' died right here a dozen times over and you wouldn't 'a' knowed anything about it — er cared."

"But you didn't die," said Eric calmly. "Say, isn't that a new squirrel? I've never seen him before," pointing to a shy, alert little fellow on the edge of the group.

"Third time he's been around," said Jabez, immensely gratified. "I was wondering if you'd notice him."

"Where's Mr. Adam?" asked Eric abruptly.

"Ain't you seen him? He went out along Stone Wall a couple of hours ago, lookin' for you, Eric. He must 'a' missed you."

"We were near Bud's Rock all afternoon. What did he want?" There was a trace of excitement in Eric's voice.

"You might as well ask me how fer it is to Jupiter," replied Jabez serenely. "He's the derndest feller I ever see fer keeping his business to hisself. Hello! Yender he comes now. I reckon he's been huntin' fer you out there all afternoon."

"That's strange," said Eric. "He's usually pretty good at finding what he looks for."

Adam Carr slowly approached from the direction of Stone Wall. A vague, indefinable feeling of unrest came over Eric, as of one who is being spied upon. Something seemed to tell him that Adam Carr had been watching him all the time they were out on Stone Wall.

"Well, he's found you, ain't he?" observed Jabez, in his driest way. Give Adam time and he *would* find what he looked for, that was Jabez's inward contention.

"Must you be going?" asked Adam, coming up to them and drawing his pipe and pouch from the pocket of his blue serge coat. The visitors had made no move to depart, although, strangely enough, both were thinking of it at the very moment he put the question.

"Goodness!" murmured Mary in wonder.

The grim face of the newcomer relaxed into a smile of self-praise. He took note of the curious expression in Eric's eyes.

"No, I'm not a mind-reader," he said, answering the unspoken question, but offering no reason for his deduction, which, after all, was not so wonderful when you stop to consider that the Blagden dinner hour was close at hand.

"It's our dinner-time," explained Eric, arising. "Say, Mr. Adam, you've got me guessing about certain things."

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, I fancy you know."

"I was getting some high-class legal advice," said Adam, again answering an unspoken question. "By the way, did you happen to see your cousin out along Stone Wall an hour or so ago?"

"No," cried the Midthornes.

Adam leaned back in the rustic bench and blew smoke into the air. "I just wondered, that's all," he observed.

"Was he out there?" demanded Eric.

"He asked me to meet him out there at four-thirty. Guess he forgot about it," said the other, more complacently than you would expect of a man who had taken a long walk to no purpose.

As a matter of fact, he knew that Chetwynd had gone to the rocks to keep the appointment, but had slipped away on discovering that his cousins were there before him. Whatever his business with Adam Carr may have been, he did not choose to have them as possible witnesses to the transaction.

"What did he want to see you *for?*" asked Eric eagerly.

"He didn't say," replied Adam Carr soberly.

"What is the mystery?" begged Eric.

"There's no mystery about it," said the other truthfully. It had ceased to be a mystery so far as he was concerned. "You'd better skip along now, or your aunt will jack you up for being late to dinner." There was finality in the remark, and Eric knew him too well to pursue the subject. A few minutes later, he and Mary took their departure, old Jabez accompanying them to the gate.

"Adam's a mighty curious feller," the old man explained apologetically.

They glanced over their shoulders at the motionless man on the bench. He had stopped smoking and was resting his elbows on his knees, staring intently at the ground, apparently oblivious to all that was going on around him.

At the dinner table that evening, Chetwynd was unusually sullen and preoccupied. He chafed at delays and in two or three instances spoke sharply to the waitress when she seemed to be longer than necessary in transit from pantry to dining-room. For a wonder, his father did not rebuke him for this display of irritation, but was painfully silent himself. Eric, covertly watching his cousin, was struck by the worn, peevish look in his face, and the hard line between his brows. He did not fail to observe that Chetwynd deliberately avoided looking at him.

From time to time, he shot a singularly penetrating glance at Mary, whose gaze seldom left the plate before her. Eric felt his blood boil. There was a menace in every glance that Chetwynd bestowed upon the girl.

Immediately after the meal came to an end, young Blagden took up his hat, and with a curt word or two to his mother, left the house. Eric knew whither he was bound.

He heard his cousin come in at nine o'clock or a little after, and go quietly to his room, without stopping in the library where his parents were reading. Later on, Mrs. Blagden passed down the hall and tapped on her son's door.

"Have you another headache to-night, dear?" he heard her ask, after she had tried the knob of the locked door. He could not catch Chetwynd's reply, but her next words were significant. "Well, don't snap my head off, please."

Eric lay awake for hours, speculating on what had transpired at Judge Bright's house. The early return home of Chetwynd was satisfying in one sense, but disturbing in another. The visit plainly was not of a social nature, nor friendly, it might be reasonable to surmise. He could not have been at Judge Bright's for more than half an hour, a circumstance which made it plain that there was no pleasure in the visit.

The conviction grew in Eric's feverish mind that the Judge's summons to Chetwynd was the result of the interview with Adam Carr.

In that case, there was something sinister behind it.

Eric was disturbed by the dread that, whatever it was, he, and perhaps Mary, were to be dragged into it. Enough had been said by Joan to convince him that they were under discussion. Could it be possible that Judge Bright had called on Adam Carr to investigate the stories told by his aunt and Mrs. Presbrey? Was the half-hour's interview with Chetwynd a part of the effort to get to the bottom of these ugly stories? The occurrences of the last few days had thrown young Midthorne into a wretched state of uncertainty and doubt. As he lay there that night, wide-eyed and troubled, he could see naught but foreboding shadows ahead of him. It was impossible to go to sleep with that sinister chill creeping through his veins, a chill that turned him sick with the nausea of dread. Near dawn he dropped off into a fitful doze, but was aroused at seven by his uncle, who never missed calling the entire household at that hour, breakfast being set for seven-thirty.

After breakfast, in a state of wretched uncertainty, he made his way, but not without some diffidence, to Joan's home, driven by the desire to find out how he stood with her since the mysterious visit of his cousin. There was something disquieting in the fact that Chetwynd did not appear for breakfast, pleading a headache. Mrs. Blagden had her coffee and toast in her son's room, which left the two Midthornes to breakfast alone with their uncle. Not more than a dozen words were uttered in conversation during the meal. Mr. Blagden, a shade greyer in the face than yesterday, it seemed to Eric, read the morning paper while he drank his coffee in sharp, jerky little sips. Mary, in a covert glance, made the discovery toward the end of the meal that her uncle was staring blankly at the print before him, without reading a word. She watched him for a minute or more; his eyes did not move. It was a circumstance worth mentioning to Eric, but she quite forgot it when her brother announced that he was going over to Joan's.

Moreover, just as they were leaving the table, Martha came in to say that Judge Bright was waiting to speak with Mr. Blagden at the telephone. Their uncle closed the library door when he went into that room to answer the call.

Eric's reception by his shy, unpractised sweetheart swept away all doubts and misgivings, and restored him in large measure to the state of bliss he had developed the day before. His relief was so great that he quite forgot his fears.

Still, when he left her after an hour in the garden, he was to experience a decidedly unpleasant shock on finding Judge Bright and Adam Carr seated together on the front porch. As he passed them, they greeted him cheerily, but he was conscious of the fact that their gaze followed him as long as he was in sight. So vivid was this impression that in order to escape the scrutiny he turned into a side street when but a block from the house.

He carried a message from Joan to Mary. His sister was to go out for a long drive with Joan in the Brights' phaeton that afternoon, when the two of them were to talk over the Sinnox school project. There was additional consolation for him in Joan's news that her father had called up Mr. Blagden during the morning to inquire when he could see him on a matter of importance. She was sure that it had to do with the school project, for he had promised her at breakfast that he would take it up with Mr. Blagden at the first opportunity. Her father was to call at the bank on the following day, Mr.

Blagden setting the time. So, she was sure, it would be all right.

She did not see Chetwynd when he called the evening before.

That afternoon Eric, more or less at peace with himself, if not with the world, took his books and sought the quiet solitude of Bud's Rock, a shady, obscure spot overlooking Stone Wall, and not far removed from the unfrequented outer road which skirted the coast. The main-travelled highway was farther inland by a mile or more. But few travellers used the narrow, abandoned road along the cliff.

Bud's Rock itself was in the heart of a miniature wilderness. It lay black and dank, moss-covered and dripping, at the edge of the woodland, almost completely hidden by the thick underbrush and trees that surrounded it. Here it was always cool and shady. At the base of the huge boulder there was a tiny plaza of vividly green grass, smooth and soft, and sweet with the smell of earth. Through the trees ahead, one had a clear view of the sea beyond the rugged, broken line of the cliffs, on which no vegetation appeared. A quarter of a mile away, the surf drummed noisily against the obstinate wall of rock, while down upon the bleak intervening space the sun sent his rays with such scorching intensity that if one crossed the rocks at midday it was at the risk of blistering the soles of his shoe-clad feet.

Years before, Eric had come upon this tiny plaza, and it always had been a favourite idling place for him. He went there to read, or to dream, or to think. Times there were when his thoughts and dreams were unpleasant ones, full of bitterness and resentment toward those who badgered him, but more often than not he found solace at the foot of Bud's Rock. No one disturbed him in this lonely nook. It was quite as if it were a domain of his own.

A little to the left of the rock, a deep, thin ravine slashed through the rocks and descended by tortuous wriggles to the sea itself. He had gone down there at low tide, and it was like going into a tomb. At high tide it would have been a tomb for anyone who ventured.

On this particular afternoon, Eric was strangely oppressed by the dreary waste of rock and water before him. He held faithfully to the work in hand, but there were moments when he found himself contemplating the unattractive vista with something like dread in his heart. Never before had he felt this way in looking at the familiar, though unlovely tract. Somehow, he was conscious of a strange dread in being alone there. More than once he wished that Mary were there to keep him company. Mary, or — blissful alternative — another whom he knew.

He had the sensation, now and again, that the sea was making ready to leap over the lofty wall, to rush at him while he sat there helpless with his back against the face of Bud's Rock. Then there was the grewsome feeling that up through the moaning ravine, a slimy monster from the deep was crawling slowly but surely, bent on crunching him in its mighty jaws. More than once, hearing a rustling sound near by, he had cast a quick glance in the direction of the ominous slit in the earth,— never ominous till now, however.

He looked at his watch at five o'clock. With a start of relief, he realised it was time to go home. Mary would have returned from her drive with Joan. She would have much to tell him. He gathered up his notes and books, and rose to stretch himself.

As he came to his feet, he saw Chetwynd Blagden standing on the rickety bridge that spanned the ravine, fifty yards or more below Bud's Rock. His back was toward Eric, and he appeared to be watching the road in the direction of Todville. His tall, herculean frame leaned against the rail of the bridge, and his arms were folded across his chest.

In considerable wonder and no little dismay, Eric watched him in silence, not with the intention of spying upon him, but because he could not make up his mind to venture forth and accost him in this lonely spot. The presentiment of evil was still uppermost in his mind. This, then, was the physical proof of impending danger: for something told him that Chetwynd personified the ominous thing that the ravine was to produce, after all.

How long had his cousin been standing on the bridge? Where had he come from, and for whom was he in waiting? Adam Carr! He was to meet Adam there, having failed him the day before. That was it. But, that being the case, why had he failed to see Eric, as on the previous occasion? His eyes had been sharp enough yesterday; why were they dull to-day?

Eric looked about for a way to leave his nook without disturbing the watcher below. Unfortunately, there was no means of reaching the road except by way of the path leading almost to the bridge itself. He realised that, in all fairness and honour, he could not stay where he was, a witness to the palpably clandestine meeting of the two men. That was an act he could not forgive in anyone else, so why should he be guilty of it himself? There was but one thing left for him to do: walk boldly down the path, speak to his cousin, and continue his peaceable way homeward, before any serious friction could result.

He knew that Chetwynd was ready and eager for the chance to quarrel. There had been a plenty of evidence of the fact during the past few days. His cousin had glowered at him with positive hatred in his eyes ever since his return from New York. There was a score to be settled, and Eric knew it. It would not be settled with boxing-gloves, but with bare fists. He was not afraid of Chetwynd, but he was especially reluctant to invite a physical clash at this time. His own blood was hot with long pent-up rage, and he knew that the slightest spark would set it aflame. The result might prove disastrous in more ways than one. This was the time for reason, for temporising, although every sinew in his body ached to be at this cheat and bully.

Just as he was on the point of starting down the slope, an action on Chetwynd's part stayed him for a moment, curiosity being responsible for his momentary hesitation.

Young Blagden drew a letter from his pocket, read it with unmistakable eagerness, and then, to the watcher's amazement, pressed the tinted sheet to his lips. There was apparent reluctance in the young bully's next act. He looked at the missive for some moments, as if in doubt, and then, with a shake of his head, drew a match from his pocket, struck it on the rail, and set fire to the corner of the tender epistle, which he held in his fingers until it was quite consumed, before dropping it into the ravine.

In the next instant, as if impelled by some telepathic force, he whirled and looked up the slope to where Eric was standing. For a full minute, the two young men remained motionless, staring at each other. Then Eric began slowly to descend.

As he emerged from the shrubbery at the base of the rock, he saw Chetwynd advancing upon him, his face white with passion, his eyes stark with alarm and apprehension.

"You infernal sneak!" he hissed through his rigid lips. "So you've been spying on me, have you? I'll fix you for that!"

As he spoke, he drew back his arm, and the next instant a jagged rock came whizzing through the air, aimed with deadly interest at Eric's head. A dozen paces separated the young men. Eric had expected some such treachery as this, and was more or less prepared for it. He leaped nimbly to one side, and the missile grazed his ear. In the same moment he stooped and swept up a stone at his feet. Chetwynd, slower than his adversary, was reaching down for another.

"Drop it!" yelled Eric. "Drop it, I say! I'll let you have this right in the face, if you pick up that rock. You know I can do it, so look out!"

Chetwynd had cause to remember Eric's ability to throw straight. He dropped the stone and covered his face with his arm, crouching back against the rail-post.

"Here!" he shouted hoarsely. "Look out what you're doing! Don't you throw that rock at me, you murdering cur. Do you want to kill me?"

Eric's pale face relaxed into a sardonic grin.

"You're a fine one to talk, you are," he cried, his voice trembling with excitement. "What did you do but try to kill me just now? I've a notion to let you have this, just to —"

"Don't!" yelled Chetwynd, in fresh alarm.

"Well, you stay where you are, then, you infernal brute. I don't want to have any trouble with you. I'm going home. I wasn't spying on you, and you know it. Don't move from where you are, Chetty, or, by thunder, I'll knock your head off."

"You can just bet you're not looking for trouble with me. If you didn't have that rock in your hand I'd come over there and kick you clear over Bud's Rock. You *are* a sneak and a spy and a lying one at that. And I'll just get you for it some day."

He was trembling with rage. If Eric had not held the upper hand over him at that moment, murder would have been done on the lonely spot.

"I don't want to talk to you, Chet," said Midthorne resolutely. "You can't drag me into a fight, much as I'd like to have it out with you. I've got good reason for beating your brains out, and you know it. You let me alone and I'll do the same by you. If there is no other way, I'll take Mary and go away from Corinth. I won't stand anything more from you. We'll let things go as they are, if you are willing, but you've *just* got to let me alone. I've not told Uncle Horace what you did to her, but I *did* tell him you stole my drawing the —"

"It's a lie!" cried Chetwynd. "I made that drawing. You dirty sneak, you tried to work that guff off on father. But I proved to him yesterday that it was *my* drawing that took the prize. He knows it now. He believes you had a purpose in lying —"

"You proved it!" cried Eric, aghast. "How could you prove it?"

"I proved it by mother, if that will satisfy you. She saw me working on it for days," snarled the other, showing his teeth.

Eric glared. "Did Aunt Rena say that?" he gasped.

"Yes. I went to her about it, against father's wish.

She told father all about you,— what a miserable liar and sneak you are, and —"

"She lied!" cried Eric fiercely.

"Here! Don't you go saying my mother is a liar. I'll — I'll —"

"You're both liars. No! Wait a minute. I don't believe Aunt Rena told your father that. She's as mean as dirt to me, but I don't think she'd do that. I'm going to ask Uncle Horace."

Chetwynd's blood-shot eyes shifted. "You'd better keep your mouth shut," he growled. "Father's promised he'd overlook it if nothing more was said about it."

"Uncle Horace knows you're a thief," cried his cousin, "and I know it, and I've got to help shield you, too. We've all got to protect the blessed Blagden name. What a joke it is!"

Chetwynd's face was of a greenish white. He looked over his shoulder as if in mortal fear that these words had been overheard. "You keep your jaw closed," he hissed.

"What's Adam Carr been watching you —" began Eric, but the look of absolute terror in his cousin's face stopped him.

"Adam Carr!" he gasped, his jaw sagging. "Has he been —" He pulled himself together with a mighty effort, gulped a couple of times, and then tried to grin derisively. "Ah, come off! You can't pull that off with me. Adam Carr's on a bank job for father."

"What did Judge Bright want to see you for last night?"

"Say, I'm not here to answer questions for you," roared Chetwynd. "You're nothing but a pauper, living off of us, anyhow. You and Mary, both of you. You're the scum of the earth. If you didn't have father back of you, nobody with any decency in 'em would look at you. You know what *your* father was and what your mother was, so why —"

"Take care, Chet! Don't say anything more," warned Eric, white to the lips.

"And you'll both come to the same end," went on the other ruthlessly. "Mary! Ho, ho! She's a fine one to talk. She got caught with me, and she had to lie out of it. She put it all on me. And I was man enough to stand for it, too."

"You lie!"

Chetwynd's eyes gleamed with a sudden malicious joy. He gave vent to a nervous, uncertain laugh.

"I do, do I? Say, you saw me burn a letter just now, didn't you? Well, it was a note from Mary. She's crazy about me. I can do what I please with her, and at any time. She's no better than any of the rest of her sort. If you think she's so blamed good and virtuous —"

"If you say another word, I'll kill you," cried Eric, quivering all over.

"You're afraid to throw it," sneered Chetwynd, wholly misunderstanding the emotions that shook his cousin's frame. "She was coming here to meet me today. She —"

Eric's heart gave a great throb of joy and triumph.

"You lie! She is out riding with Joan Bright. Oh, you cowardly dog! You beast!"

"You can say such things to me because you've got a rock in your hand. If —"

Without hesitation, Eric tossed the rock into the ditch.

Like a ferocious, suddenly-freed tiger, Chetwynd sprang forward, a snarl of fury on his lips. They came together with a crash. . . . Twice Eric went down from savage body blows. Once he was kicked in the side while trying to arise. They fought their way out upon the rickety bridge, the smaller youth carefully guarding his face from the wild, murderous blows of the young giant. At last, the chance came to send in a telling blow of his own.

He drove his fist against his cousin's jaw as he came in with a crouching, bull-like rush, death-lust in his convulsed face.

Chetwynd staggered back against the railing of the bridge, clutching at it to save himself from falling. A look of foolish surprise came into his eyes, to be succeeded a second later by one of fearful dismay.

"O God!" welled from young Blagden's lips.

The frail support creaked and splintered. There was a tearing, cracking sound, and then the rail gave way. Chetwynd's shriek of horror was even less sickening than the groan that fell from Eric's lips as he leaped forward to catch the tottering figure on the edge.

In the twinkling of an eye he stood alone on the shuddering bridge.

Up from the depths came a horrid scream, cut short by the crash of timbers and the thud of a heavy body on the rocks seventy feet below. Then came utter stillness.

For a long time Eric Midthorne stood rooted to the spot, petrified by horror. He had waited an age, it seemed, for the thud of that whirling, unseen body. Now he knew that the thing which had been so vitally alive a moment ago was alive no longer.

He waited for a shout from below, or even a groan,—anything that would bring to him the courage to look down at the thing that had swayed, and writhed and clawed the air but a moment before. He could see nothing but that,— he could hear nothing but the wild scream.

His body seemed to have turned to ice. He was freezing. Suddenly his knees gave way and he dropped heavily in his tracks. Fascinated by horror, he dragged himself to the edge,— to the very spot where Chetwynd had last been seen,— and peered over the side, down through that dark, sunless rift in the rocks.

Dimly outlined against the black, moist floor of the ravine there was a huddled, motionless shape that took no definite form, but lay like a heap of discarded garments waiting for the visit of the old iron and rags man. For many minutes the youth on the bridge, transfixed by horror, glared at this vague shape, hoping against hope that it would arise and resolve itself into human form,— into the human form he had hated so bitterly.

But there was no movement of the heap, there was no sound, there was no sign. The thing down there was Chetwynd Blagden,— big, brutal, virile Chetwynd,— and it was dead, horribly dead!

With a low moan of realisation, Eric drew back from the edge, covering his eyes with his hands to shut out the dreadful sight.

He had killed his cousin!

He was a murderer!

CHAPTER X

THE FLIGHT OF CHETWYND BLAGDEN

Slowly his dulled brain took in the fact that someone was speaking to him, that a voice, hard and metallic, was penetrating his consciousness. The sounds seemed to come out of the air, the enveloping air; he could not locate them, and yet the speaker stood at the end of the bridge, in plain view.

"I'm sorry to say I taught you that blow," said the voice. It seemed to the stunned, bewildered boy that this sentence was repeated over and over again. There had been words before these, but they had failed to pierce his intelligence.

Suddenly, as if spurred by an electric shock, he sprang to his feet to find himself staring into the grim, unsmiling face of Adam Carr. The realisation that someone had witnessed the sickening accident — he could not think of it as anything else — came over him like a flash.

There was a witness! There was someone to tell his uncle and aunt that they had been right about him all along! Uppermost in his mind, in that instant, was the dread of their uplifted, accusing hands. *They*, at least, would never believe that it was an accident. They would see that he swung for it!

"Yes, I saw most of it," said Adam Carr, replying to the question in those great, stricken eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Carr, why didn't you come sooner? Why didn't you stop it?" fell in hoarse, unnatural tones from the rigid lips.

"I saw it from afar. The — the rail was very rotten. A child's weight would have broken it down. See!" With that, he stretched out his hand and pushed the remaining rail from its fastenings. "It's a crime to let such timbers stay — but, this is no time to find fault. We must get down there to him. He may be alive."

"He is down there,— dead!" wailed Eric. "I can see him. Look! That black thing there by the pile of shells!"

"Brace up! Brace up! Don't lose your nerve, my lad. I've seen many a dead man, and so will you before you die. You —"

"But you've never killed a man, as I have. I am a mur —"

"Don't be so sure that I've never killed a man, my lad. Come along! Don't be afraid. He can't hurt you now."

"It's no use. He's dead," groaned the boy. "I know — I can see. He hasn't moved. I — I didn't know — it would look like that. Why, there's no shape to it. I —"

Adam Carr grasped him by the arm and fairly dragged him off the bridge and into the path that led by devious windings to the bottom of the ravine. The boy was sobbing, but his eyes were wide and dry; his lips were contorted by that unspeakable grin that denotes overpowering horror.

"I didn't mean to do it," he cried, over and over again. "He forced me to fight. He was licking me when I hit him that time. I couldn't have beat him, Mr. Carr. The rail —"

"Stop talking," grated the man. "Don't whine about it. It's done, and that's all there is to it."

"I'm a murderer," groaned the miserable boy.

"They said I'd do it some day. They'll hang me. Then what will become of Mary? Oh, why did I stand up to him? Why didn't I run?"

"Because you're not that sort," snapped the detective. "Now shut your mouth. You've got to begin it sooner or later, and you'd better start in right now. Not another word out of you. Stop it, I say!"

Half-blind with horror, the unhappy youth stumbled along in the trail of Adam Carr. It did not enter his mind to flee from the hated spot. He followed as if hypnotised.

They were five minutes in reaching the spot where Chetwynd lay, a crushed, spineless mass. Eric threw himself down beside the body, pleading in accents wild for a word, a single word, from the lips of his late adversary.

"Get back," commanded Adam sharply. "Let me attend to this." He took the boy's place. In a moment he arose, and shook his head. "It's all up with him. Dead as a mackerel."

"Try again! Maybe he's breathing. Try his heart," cried the wretched Eric. "We must go for a doctor. I'll go. You look after him—"

"No use, my lad. He's done for. He'll never bother you again; he'll steal no more drawings from you; he'll—but we'll talk about that later on. Here! Grab hold of his legs."

Eric shrank back, aghast. "Wha—what are you going to do?"

"Hide it—I mean *him* under that clump of vines over there." Eric still held back. The man looked at him for a moment, and then laid his hand on his shoulder. "See here, Eric," he said, a wonderful kindness in his voice, "no one knows of this but you and me.

No one ever need know. He's just disappeared, that's all — disappeared forever. People do that sort of thing sometimes. And," here his eyes narrowed, "let me tell you this: your cousin had the best reason in the world for skipping out."

"I don't understand," murmured the bewildered Eric.

"You will, when I explain. Take hold of him. Don't be afraid. We'll hide him until after dark."

Eric shook his head dully. "No, I can't do that, Mr. Carr. It's wrong."

"Didn't you hear what I said about being the only witness?" demanded Adam. "No one will ever find you out, depend on that."

"I've got to tell Uncle Horace," cried Eric, twisting his fingers. "I've just *got* to."

"Well, if you won't, you won't," said the man grimly. "Stay where you are. I'll do it myself."

Eric, shuddering, turned his back while the other man took up the limp figure and, groaning under its weight, struggled across the rocks to the dense clump of vines that sprang from the base of the wall.

"Now you can look," he remarked coolly, a few minutes later. He had covered the body in the mass of green vines.

Eric looked on dumbly as the older man, with furtive glances aloft and up and down the dark crevasse, began a thorough and systematic search of the ground, his methods not unlike those of a dog smelling out a buried bone. He picked up a match-safe and pieces of the broken crystal of the dead man's open-faced watch. A few scattered coins, part of a gold collar button that had been snapped in two by the strain on the band, the top of a fountain pen — nothing seemed to escape the trained eye of the searcher, who worked with a swiftness that was amazing. For yards in every direction he scanned the ground. At last, with a satisfied grunt, he gave over the search and began to wash the spattered blood-stains from the rocks, scooping up water from the trickling rivulet that seeped through a crack in the wall.

Young Midthorne, limp as a rag, sat on a boulder, his chin in his hands, and watched these proceedings as if fascinated.

Adam came over and touched him on the shoulder. "Let's get out of this," he said sharply. Without a word, Eric arose and followed him up the defile. Not a word was spoken until they came out upon the ledge far above. The young man walked as if in a dream. He was completely under the spell exorcised by this calm, emotionless master of destiny.

They seemed to be utterly alone in the world, these two. The placid landscape held no other living creature save themselves.

After a swift, penetrating glance about him, Adam Carr strode out upon the bridge, motioning his companion to remain where he was. He renewed his careful search. At its conclusion, he calmly kicked away all that remained of the broken rail. It clattered upon the rocks far below, bringing a sharp quiver of alarm to the silent watcher.

"I guess there's nothing left to give us away," remarked Adam, as coolly as if he were speaking of the most trivial thing in the world. "Now, I'll give you a few pointers, Eric. You can take my advice or leave it, just as you please, but I want you to understand that I am your friend and you can depend on me to the day of your death, or mine. We'll go up there on Bud's Rock and talk it over." . . . The long shadow of the rock stretched out below them on the slate-coloured plain. The late afternoon sun had slipped down behind the upper ridge. Through Eric's dazed, torpid mind ran the incongruous thought that Joan and Mary were in from their peaceful, happy drive through the shady lanes. He sat beside Adam Carr on the grassy slope, staring before him with blurred eyes as the man's low, insistent voice kept forever pounding at his intelligence.

"You are not morally guilty, my lad, so get it out of your mind. What happened was an accident. It might just as well have been you who went off the bridge. You —"

"Why are you saying all this to me?" asked Eric, out of his stupor.

"I want to help you. You must be saved. It wasn't your fault, you say. I believe you, Eric, but I've had so much to do with courts and juries and public opinion that I am in a position to know the world would doubt your story. Your uncle and aunt knew that you hated Chetwynd. Do you suppose they'd believe you now? No, my lad. They'd say you waylaid him, knocked him on the head, and tumbled him into the Cut. You have no witnesses, and I could not help you. I saw nothing but the end of the row. For all I know, you may have attacked him and he was defending himself as best he could. You may have struck him first from behind. I have only your word for it. I should have to testify that I saw you strike him and knock him through the rail. My testimony wouldn't help you any. Besides, they would have proof that you had your own reasons for killing him in cold blood. I know all about his mistreatment of Mary, and I know that you charge him with taking your drawing. I know everything there is to know about his actions during the past three weeks. I've been watching him all the time. Let me tell you this: he's better off dead."

"But I — I didn't mean to do it, I swear I didn't," murmured Eric.

"That's why I say you are not actually guilty. In any event, it was self-defence. If it were not for your well-known hatred for him, your own word might be taken for that. But you had threatened to kill him. At least, so he told your uncle and aunt and Judge Bright on more than one occasion."

"I never threatened to kill him," cried Eric, in a cold perspiration. "He lied, if he said so."

"That's what I told Judge Bright. The Judge doesn't believe it of you, but at the same time if he were called upon to testify he would have to say that Chetwynd told him that he was afraid of you. It would be bad for you. Now, if you'll be guided by me, you can save yourself. It — it might mean hanging, my lad, and God knows you don't deserve punishment of any kind."

"But, he's dead. They'll search for him. They'll find his body. I — I never could stand up and deny it if they accused me of it."

"Now, listen to me," said Adam Carr earnestly, fixing the boy with his keen eyes. "They won't find him. I'll see to that. I'm going to stand by you in this business, but you've got to stand by me. You've got to keep your lips closed forever. I can't afford to be mixed up in it, don't you see? I'm supposed to hunt down men, not to assist them in escaping."

"I can't do it!" groaned the boy.

"See here! Answer me this question: did you deliberately, wantonly kill your cousin?"

"No! God knows I didn't."

"But God isn't going to judge you for awhile, understand that. You'll be judged by men, before God gets a chance to forgive you. God isn't going to hold this against you, so why should you give your fellow man a chance to do you harm? You're not guilty of murder, but — well, I guess you're beginning to understand. I'm thinking for you and for Mary, my boy, and I'm thinking hard. You can trust me. I will do what is right and just, for I know what these damned brutes of men do when they get on a jury, or when they set out to hound a fellow-creature to his grave. *I* am your judge, Eric. You are the only witness I shall examine, and I will acquit you of all blame on your own word. You may not sleep well to-night, but to-morrow you will realise that you did what could not be helped and that the God you speak of took away Chetwynd's life — God and a community that does not keep its bridges in repair. Now, tell me slowly, carefully, just what brought on the fight."

Eric told the story from beginning to end, from the instant he saw Chetwynd on the bridge to his disappearance over the edge.

"I couldn't stand it any longer when he said that about my sister. I just had to fight. It was a fair fight, too,— as fair as I know how. I — I watched for my chance to get in that blow you taught me. I — well, that's all."

"He deserved the licking," said Adam, a grim smile on his lips. "And I won't say he didn't deserve the punishment God gave him, too. He was a rascal, Eric,— a nasty rascal. I can tell you who that letter was from. It was from a woman in New York, a woman on whom he was spending thousands of dollars that didn't belong to him."

"Didn't belong to him?"

"Yes. I suppose you believed all that private instruction rot, too, the same as his father and mother did. Well, I've got a few rare facts to lay before the Blagdens."

There was such utter vindictiveness in his manner of speech that Eric looked at him in wonder.

"Oh, I don't profess love for your fine Blagdens," said Adam gruffly. "Horace and I used to play together when we were little chaps. Oswald Bright was another of my playmates. I was a poor sailorman's son; they were of the elect. I knew your mother, Eric, when she was a tiny little girl. But our family left Corinth long before she was in shoe-top frocks, and I never saw her afterward. That's neither here nor there. I've never forgotten the scurvy trick Horace played on me in school. Somebody in our room was stealing things from the desks of the other scholars. Horace openly accused me of it. I was driven out in disgrace. Not one of my old playmates would look at me, except Oswald Bright. By George, he was a great judge, even in those days. He defended me on all occasions, and he — he pulled me out of the water once when I actually tried to drown myself because I was so unhappy. He put new courage into me.

"My father moved to Gloucester a few months afterward, but one day Oswald wrote me a letter saying they had caught the real thief in the act of pilfering, and he confessed to the whole range of thefts. He was sent to the house of correction and proved a bad lot all the rest of his life. But I never forgot Horace Blagden's charge against me. Years passed before he grudgingly apologised to me at Bright's suggestion. I don't mind saying I've never liked your Uncle Horace, and that's putting it gently. Now my turn has come. He'll squirm when I tell him the name of the man who got away with the bank's money a few months ago. It will turn his hair greyer than it is when he finds out for a certainty that it wasn't John Payson who took it."

"Payson? The teller who used to be —"

"In Chetwynd's place," completed Adam grimly. "A lot of money was taken out about the time Payson left the bank. Your uncle sent for me. He was determined Jack was the thief. I went to work. For weeks and weeks I watched every move that fellow made, not so much for the purpose of finding him guilty to please Horace Blagden, but to establish his innocence to please myself. Payson was no more guilty of robbing that bank than you are, and I was sure of it from the beginning. Horace wouldn't have it so. He insisted that I keep after him. He said he'd 'get him' if it took years. Well, I told him I'd find the thief, I didn't care how long it took. So I stuck to the case, chiefly to clear Jack Payson. His dad was my best friend when we were boys, and his mother is one of the finest women in the world. She's a widow now and Jack supports her. To-morrow I'm going up to Horace Blagden's house to make a charge against the real thief."

Eric was leaning forward, staring at the hard-set face of the speaker, his eyes wide with understanding.

"You don't mean — Chetwynd?" he cried.

"I do mean Chetwynd. He was the thief. I have positive proof. He took seven thousand dollars out of sealed packages in the vault the second day after he went into the bank to be instructed by Payson. They kept these packages there for emergency cases, being a safe old New England bank, you know." His grin was the quintessence of irony. "The money was not missed for weeks, but as some smaller bills had disappeared from the cage just before Payson left, it was recalled, and suspicion fell on him."

"Chetwynd stole all that money?"

"He needed it," chuckled Adam reflectively. "It's an expensive luxury, keeping a girl in fine clothes, carriages and champagne, let me tell you that. He met her when he was in college, and she knew he was too good to let slip. So she hung on. She got most of the seven thousand dollars down there in little old New York, and she laughed at him behind his back. I've had more than one friendly chat with her, and I've drunk some of his champagne, although he didn't know of it. I may add that she looked on me as a rich ranch-owner from the Far West. She didn't know me for the original Adam. I got a good deal out of Miss Bunnie De Vinne. Yes, my boy, I ran your cousin right down to the ground. A day or two ago I laid it all before Judge Bright. He begged me to let the matter drop. But I refused. I had told Horace I'd find the thief, and that it wouldn't be poor Jack Payson. So there you are! To-morrow I'm going to make public my discovery and ask for the arrest of Chetwynd Blagden for embezzlement."

He leaned back against the rock and watched the varying expressions in Eric's face,— amazement and perplexity being paramount.

"His arrest?" cried he, with a swift, involuntary glance toward the ravine. "Why,— why, how can you arrest him now? He's — he's —"

"That's just the point," said Adam composedly. "But I can bring charges against him, can't I?"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Carr."

"Of course, I can't arrest him for the very good reason that he got wind of my intention and skipped out,— we'll say to-day."

Eric looked his perplexity.

"Don't you catch my meaning?" asked Adam, with his first sign of enthusiasm. "Chetwynd isn't dead. Not at all. He skipped out to avoid arrest."

"I — I see," murmured the other, light breaking in on him.

"I went through his pockets down there in the Cut," went on Adam. "He had five hundred dollars in bills. He was certain that I knew everything. Judge Bright told him enough last night to open his eyes pretty thoroughly. He brought that money out here to buy me off. He was desperate, and he was willing to risk discovery at the bank in order to get me off his back, so to speak. So, you see, all this makes it very simple for us. When I go in to-morrow to accuse him of the crime, he won't be there. His father will say that he hasn't been at home since noon to-day. Then, I'll tell him why. He has vamosed, that's all there is to it."

He leaned back and studied his young friend's face once more, this time being relieved to see signs of hope and credulity there.

"Oh, if I can only keep them from finding out," said Eric, in agitated, eager tones. "I — I don't want to go to prison, Mr. Carr. I wonder — I wonder if we can do it. You can do your part, I know, but can I face them? I — I never told a lie in my life."

"You won't have to tell one now. Just keep your lips closed. Don't breathe a word to a soul — never, so long as you live, my boy."

"But I will have to sit by and join in the talk about him at home."

"There won't be much said about him at home, I'll promise you that. His name won't be mentioned there."

"But how will Uncle Horace explain his disappearance? You forget that."

"I intend to explain it," said Adam grimly. "I have all my proof in hand. The story goes to the newspapers to-morrow,— all of it."

"Oh, you can't do that! It would kill Uncle Horace." Eric was genuinely grieved.

"Horace Blagden hasn't enough money, all told, to buy my silence. I've waited years for the chance to strike back at him. Nothing on earth can stay the blow — nothing!"

Eric watched his convulsed face in a sort of stupefaction for a few moments. Then his mind abruptly returned to his own affairs.

"They will find the body," he half-whispered.

"I will attend to that. No one will ever see that body after twelve o'clock to-night, unless the sea dries up and leaves its bottom bare. No, my boy, Chetwynd's name will never be mentioned by his father after to-morrow. As for you, you won't have any choice in the matter. Your uncle will give you your orders. No one will be allowed to mention his name in his home, or in his presence if he can prevent it. That's how he will take it. I'm sorry for one thing, Eric, but I won't hold it as a grudge against you. You deprived me of the joy of putting that young scoundrel where he belongs — behind the bars. I have said to myself I'd bury him in a prison cell. I can't do that now, but I will bury him somewhere else."

"You — you are a hard man, Mr. Carr. I didn't believe any man could be so bitter, so hard."

"We won't talk about that, if you please," said the other coldly. "You can thank your lucky stars that I am a hard man, and that I am your friend. You'd be in a devil of a mess, if I were not just what I am. Now, here are your books and papers. I picked 'em up for you. Take them and go as if nothing had happened."

"I can't do it! I'll dream of him all the rest of —"

"Rubbish! You're young and you'll sleep a long sight better than you would if you were in a cell, waiting for the hangman's noose. You have *not* committed a murder. Bear that in mind, always. It was an accident. Can't you say that to yourself, over and over again? You know it is true. Time will do the rest for you. Now, get along home." The man arose and imperiously motioned for his companion to be off down the slope.

Eric hesitated. "What — what are you going to do?"

"I am going to walk part way with you."

"And leave — leave it there alone?"

"Oh, it won't run away," said Adam. "Besides, you forget it isn't there. It's on the way to New York to meet Bunnie De Vinne."

It was grim humour. The speaker himself chuckled over it, and Eric, in a sort of hysterical terror, joined in with a harsh, staccato laugh that was cut short by the sharp command of his conscience.

As they came out upon the bridge, Adam Carr grasped his companion by the arm and hurried him across, as if there were devils and witches behind them.

"I did that to keep you from looking down into the ravine," he announced, in response to the look of amazement in Eric's eyes.

They walked rapidly down the narrow, fast-darkening road, between sombre rocks and shaggy brushwood, without so much as a single look backward.

Neither spoke for a long time. At last Adam Carr broke the silence by remarking, in the most casual way:

"I left the five hundred in his pocket."

Eric looked up from the road, which he had been covering with long, rigid strides. "I'm glad of that, Mr. Carr."

"He stole it, but that's no reason why I should steal it from him. I guess the bank won't go to the wall if it never gets back."

"No, I guess not," said Eric mechanically.

The sky grew darker. Long, thin shadows from the slope above advanced to meet them as they strode into the falling dusk, shadows that seemed to point eternally backward over the shoulder of the wretched boy, as if telling him of the long, black road that Chetwynd's ghost was traversing in the painful effort to catch up to him, crushed and mangled but still revengeful.

Again Adam spoke. They were nearing the upper gate to the Seaman's Home, and his father would be waiting for him there.

"Judge Bright had him up there last night to see if he couldn't get him to give up this girl in New York. He didn't mention the embezzlement, but he sort of opened Chetwynd's eyes to a good many things. The Judge made me promise to give him the chance to wring an honest confession out of him. But Chetwynd wasn't the kind to confess a wrong. He couldn't. He was a Blagden. So he told the Judge to go to the devil and left the house."

"See here, Mr. Carr, you've got to tell me just what you're going to do with — with Chetwynd's body. I —"

"Sh! Not so loud, my boy. Well, if you must know, I'll tell you. There's no moon to-night. If you should happen to be strolling along Stone Wall at eleven or twelve to-night, and if you possess the eyes of a cat, you will see a small boat put out to sea from a point near the mouth of the ravine. There will be two men in that boat, one dead, one alive. The living —"

Eric grasped his arm in an ecstasy of horror.

"You're not going to row out to sea *alone* with — with it in the boat with you?"

"Of course. I'm not afraid of ghosts. If I was, I'd be haunted all the time. You see, Eric, in my time I've killed a man or two. I've had to do it or be killed myself, just as you might have been. Yes, I'm going to take him five or six miles out, and leave him there. He will go down in an old iron chest of mine, and the whole Atlantic Ocean will not be strong enough to budge that chest, once it touches bottom."

"God in heaven!" groaned the boy, all a-tremble with the horror of this grewsome declaration.

"You've heard father sing that song about 'dead men's chests,' haven't you?" went on Adam calmly. "Well,—"

"For heaven's sake, don't!" cried the boy.

"I'm sorry, Eric," said the other, laying his hand on the boy's arm. "I guess I'm a rather cold-blooded chap. I didn't mean to upset you so."

"Mr. Carr, I want you to take me along with you to-night," said Eric, abruptly halting in the middle of the road, a strong note of resoluteness in his voice.

"What?"

"Yes, I mean it. If you are going to do it in that way, I want to be with you. It's this way, Mr. Carr: if I've got to keep quiet all my life about what I've done, I *must* be sure in my own mind that the — that he is really out there at the bottom of the sea. I've got to *know* it for myself."

"Don't you trust me?" asked Adam, with a queer little smile.

"I've got to *know* it for myself," repeated Eric resolutely.

Adam resumed his rapid pace without replying. His head was bent and his hands were pushed deep into his coat pockets. Eric kept close to his side. After twenty rods or more had been covered in silence, save for the hard breathing of the two pedestrians, the detective turned to his companion.

"I guess you're right. You *will* want to be sure, won't you? Come to Fisher's Landing at ten o'clock. I'll be there with a boat."

Eric shuddered. "It's — it's going to be horrible," he said, striving to set his chattering teeth.

They could see old Jabez at the gate, a hundred yards ahead. He was smoking and at peace with the world.

Eric wondered if he would ever be at peace with the world again.

"Uncle Horace and Aunt Rena will expect Chetwynd to come back some day," he mused aloud. "They'll never get over expecting him. It will always be that way with them. I don't believe I can stand it, Mr.

Carr. They'll wonder where he is, whether he's well or ill, in trouble or out of it, well cared for or starving. It's — it's terrible to think of."

"My boy," said Adam quietly, "you've saved them from a great deal worse trouble than all that. Some men *ought* to die young."

CHAPTER XI

THE SHADOWS FALL

It was long after two o'clock in the morning when Eric, drenched by the sea-mists, stole across the lawn and let himself into the darkened house on the hill, through a window he had left unfastened at the time of his stealthy departure several hours before. He was faint from the horrors of that midnight excursion. His legs trembled beneath him as he crept up the staircase and down the long hall to his room. An impulse, grewsome enough, caused him to pause for an instant before the closed door of Chetwynd's room. He listened there for a moment, and then hurried on as if afraid that the door would open in his face to reveal the figure of — Chetwynd himself!

The house was as still as death itself. He knew that his uncle and aunt were sleeping soundly in the big blue room overlooking the street, in serene ignorance of what the morning was to bring to them. Somehow, he had the uncanny feeling that this was the last night on which they would sleep soundly and in peace.

In his own room at last, he softly opened the door leading to the smaller one occupied by Mary. He could not see her for the darkness, but in time his heart-beats subsided so that his ears could detect the soft, regular breathing of the girl in the white bed across the room.

He undressed in the dark, leaped into bed, and although the night was very warm, pulled the coverlet over his shivering frame, and closed his eyes so tightly that they hurt, in the effort to go to sleep instantly, whether his brain willed it or no. Many minutes passed and sleep came not because he courted it so zealously. He heard the muffled strokes of the ancient clock in the hallway below. He remembered that it was out of repair — it had been ever since he could recall — and was as likely to strike fifteen as it was one; it never struck the correct number. The hour was three, he knew, but he found himself wondering how far out of the way the futile time-piece would prove to be. He counted eleven. Then the silence was more death-like than before. The incongruous thought flashed through his mind that his uncle, being a methodical person, was singularly remiss in allowing the clock to go on such a prolonged tantrum as this.

Suddenly he remembered that he had not said his prayers. He never had missed saying them before. Mr. Presbrey had been particularly imperative about the prayers. Formerly he had knelt at the rail of the bed to say them, but of late he had been mumbling them in bed, asserting an independence that rather pleased him, although he was careful not to apprise Mr. Presbrey of the departure. Impelled by a strange power which would not be resisted, he slipped out of bed and knelt once more in the old, accepted way. Before he knew what had happened, in the course of the set prayer which the minister had prepared for him, he mumbled the sentence: "Bless Uncle Horace and Aunt Rena and Cousin Chetwynd, and bless my dear sister —"

But there he stopped. Chetwynd! The name seemed to strike back at his lips. The prayer was ended.

As he started to arise, a long, quavering cry came from Mary's room. He sprang to his feet, electrified, his whole body rigid from the shock to his overwrought nerves. With bated breath and glaring eyes, he waited for a repetition of the sound. It came a moment later, this time louder and with a note of terror:

"Eric!"

It was Mary's voice, after all. A wave of relief surged over him. In two bounds he was at her door.

"What is it? What is the matter, Mary?"

"Come here, Eric," she cried plaintively. "Oh, I've had such a terrible dream. Please light the gas, just for a minute. It was so real. I wonder if it could have been true. Did you hear anyone go out of my door?"

"No," he replied, stopping in the middle of the room, conscious of a strange premonition. "You were dreaming. No one has been here."

"Light the gas. I am so nervous. I thought Chetwynd was in the room, standing at the side of my bed, with his hands reaching out to grab hold of me. He had the most awful look in his face. He was saying something to me. I couldn't catch all of the words, I was so frightened, and his voice was so thick and hoarse. But I did understand part of it. It was bad, oh, so vile. I don't know why I should dream such things. Won't you light the gas, Eric, please?"

But he stood there as if turned to stone — the blood in his veins congealed. She heard strange, mumbled words on his lips.

"Oh, God, I wonder if he *was* here. Can he be here now, in this room?"

"No, no, you ninny," cried she, with a shrill little laugh. "Of course, it was a dream. I'm wide awake now. I'm sorry I disturbed you, Eric. But,—please stay with me for a little while. It *was* so real, and I'm such a coward. You know how frightened I am of him anyway. Sit down on the bed, Eric."

"I shan't light the gas," he said resolutely. He would not let her see his face. That was out of the question.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. In the darkness her eager little hand sought his, and found it as cold as ice.

"How cold your hand is," she cried.

"Is it?" he asked mechanically.

"Listen, Eric, and I'll tell you why I had the dream. They say there is no explanation for one's dreams, but I don't believe it. I think, if one can only go back into one's mind, in some little forgotten corner of it, he will be sure to find an impression, or a thought, or a memory that will furnish the cause for every single dream. Sometimes we may have to go back of our present existence, into the one before this, or maybe we project ourselves into a future incarnation, but we —"

"Don't talk nonsense, Mary," he interrupted gruffly.

"It isn't nonsense," she cried. "Joan and I were talking about re-incarnation to-day. She believes in it, just as I do. She thinks when we die our souls pass on to another body, and the good in us grows while the bad decreases."

"Tell me: what caused this dream of yours?"

Her hand began to tremble. "I ought not to tell you," she said nervously. "You will quarrel with Chetwynd. You — you — Oh, Eric, you might do something dreadful."

"What, for instance?" he asked deliberately.

"You must promise me first that you won't — fight him. Oh, I am so afraid, Eric, that you will let your temper get the better of you."

"What has he said to you,— what has he done?" demanded her brother, his hatred for his cousin lifting itself above all other sensations. Oddly, he felt a sudden, fierce desire to fall upon and destroy a living Chetwynd.

"Promise me."

"All right. I — I shan't do anything," he groaned, and she mistook the tone for one of bitter resignation.

"Well, he — insulted me to-day. I — I can't tell you what he said to me, Eric. It was too vile. I could have killed him myself. He —"

"What did he say?" demanded Eric. She was struck by the sudden, exultant note in his voice. It was as if he were glad that she had been subjected to the affront.

"I can't tell you. He is the vilest thing in all this world. Oh, I hope God will punish him,— I *know* he will. When I cried and told him never to speak to me again, he said — Oh, Eric, dear, I can't tell you."

"Go on, go on!"

"He said I wasn't any better than mother was, and for me to stop whining. He scared me by threatening to tell people that I — I had already been bad,— like the girls at French Fannie's — and if I didn't —"

Eric stood up and lifted his clenched hands to heaven, a great sob of joy bursting from his throat.

"Oh, now it's all right! It's all right! I'm glad! Curse him, I'm glad!"

Mary sat bolt upright and cried out in alarm.

"What are you saying, Eric? Glad? Why — why are you glad?"

He caught his breath. The thrill of exultation passed in a flash; his turbulent thoughts crowded into a narrow channel that led him back to safety. For the first time since the events of the afternoon, he found himself in full possession of his wits. A wonderful cunning took lodgment where despair and remorse had been. God *had* punished. It was God, after all. Adam had said so, Mary had hoped it would be so. God had punished, through him,— the one best qualified to be His agent. It was as it should be.

His brain worked quickly. "I'm glad we know just the kind of a scoundrel he is. There won't be any row between us, Mary, but I'm going to tell him in the morning that he's got to let you alone. That's all. I can settle his case by telling what I know about the girl he's keeping in New York."

Then, to ease his own mind, he briefly told her of that single phase in the unsavoury life of their cousin, carefully refraining from any mention of his peculations, leaving that to the developments of another day. Mary was appalled by the disclosure.

"What would Aunt Rena say if she knew?" she whispered, in awe.

He plied her with questions, eager to obtain further justification for himself, and succeeded in getting a rather tearful statement of facts. Chetwynd had made vile proposals to this sixteen-year old girl, and had threatened her in no vague terms. The hateful encounter took place at the noon hour, just before she started out for her drive with Joan.

"Won't it be fine if they will let me go to Miss Sinnox's with Joan," she cried in the end. "If only to get away from Chetwynd. I — I don't believe I could stay here next winter, Eric, with you away at college. I am so afraid of him. Why — why, I placed a chair against my door to-night. I was afraid he might try to come in here before you got home."

He started. "Before I got home?"

"I looked into your room at ten o'clock and you were not there."

He turned very cold. "It was so hot in there that I went outside for a little while," he explained dully.

"I listened nearly all night for him. He was out, too. Go and listen at his door, Eric. See if he is in there."

"Nonsense. I can't go snooping around like that. He's in, of course. He won't dare come in here. You're foolish, dear. Go to sleep."

"Leave your door wide open, please," she begged.

He was silent for a moment. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You're nervous, and I don't blame you. I'll get a blanket and a pillow and lie here on the floor by your window."

She was satisfied. In ten minutes she was sound asleep, secure in his presence. He lay very still and tense under the window ledge, staring wide-eyed up into the darkness, the soft night-wind blowing across his face.

At last his hands unclenched themselves and his whole body relaxed in surrender to the new despair as he lay there thinking it all out.

He could not go on being the sweetheart of Joan Bright!

. . . .

At ten o'clock Adam Carr presented himself at the bank and enquired for President Blagden. He was informed that Mr. Blagden had not yet come down. He had not been late before in the memory of the oldest employé.

"Overslept, I daresay," remarked Adam laconically.

"He never does that, sir," replied the ancient person who served as janitor and day watchman.

"I'll wait," said Adam. "By the way, is his son here?"

"No, sir. That's what makes me think there's something wrong up at the house."

"Have you telephoned?"

"Mr. Gray did, a moment ago. No one is ever late here, sir. That is, among the employés. It's Mr. Blagden's rule. Sickness is the only excuse. Or a death in the family."

"Umph!" said Mr. Carr.

Horace came in at ten-thirty. His first glance was in the direction of the teller's cage occupied by his son. Adam noticed a slight contraction of his eye-brows, and a no uncertain pursing of the lower lip.

He intercepted Mr. Blagden before he reached the door leading to his private office.

"Just a word, Mr. Blagden —" he began.

"Not at present, if you please," interrupted Horace, so irritably that the listening clerks forgot themselves and looked up. Mr. Blagden was never anything but suave.

"I can't wait," announced Adam shortly.

Horace paused. His austerity seemed to crumble before the very eyes of the furtive watchers. Indeed, they were permitted to witness an amazing metamorphosis. He had turned sharply at Adam's curt remark. For a second or two his haughty stare held. Then his lips parted and his hand went up with a spasmodic jerk as if to reclaim physical control of his features, but no power of his own could conquer the sudden feeling of dread and apprehension that rushed up from within to reveal itself in his eyes. Intuitively he knew that calamity was upon him. A blow was about to be struck.

" Come into my room," he said harshly. It would never do for those fellows behind the counters to see the blow fall, and to go forth with the story of how he shrivelled beneath it.

Adam followed him into the private office.

" Well," said Horace, turning upon him as soon as the door was closed.

" I have discovered the thief," said Adam quietly.

For a full minute the two men faced each other.

" How much do you ask? What is your price, Adam? " asked Horace, a deathly pallor in his cheek. He put out his hand to steady himself against the table.

" Price? " demanded Adam, with a frown. " What do you mean? I ask for nothing but the private reward you offered in the name of the bank."

" It — it isn't young Payson? "

" No, it isn't. If I were you, Horace, I'd put that fellow back in his job here. He's honest."

" Speak out, man. Tell me the truth. Have done with it," cried Horace, suddenly losing control of his nerves. He was shaking like a leaf.

" You were bent on punishing the thief, Horace. You said you'd give a thousand dollars to see him put where all thieves ought to be. In all the history of the bank, there had not been a thief among its employés. This thief was the *only* thief. You were determined to make a lasting example of him. You were going to punish him if it took years to find the necessary proof. Well, I've got the proof, all of it. There's enough of it to put him comfortably where all thieves ought to be."

Horace made a great effort to pull himself together.

" Will you be more specific, Carr? " he said, but his voice shook.

Adam looked at him in wonder, and with a trace of pity in his eyes.

"It's going to be pretty hard, Horace. I hope you'll take it like a man."

Horace straightened up; his gaze tried to meet that of the detective without quailing.

"I have asked you to be quite specific, Carr," he repeated.

"Where is your son?" demanded Adam abruptly.

Horace seemed to draw his shoulders in as if his body was undergoing a tightening process.

"My son? He — See here, Carr, what *do* you know of him? Where is he? Don't waste words. For — for God's sake, out with it."

"Do you mean to say that you don't know where he is?" demanded Adam loudly. "Isn't he at home?"

"Sh! Not so loud, please! No, he is not at home. I will be quite frank with you, he did not come home last night. He's — he's gone."

"Are you speaking the truth?"

"Sir!"

"I understand, Horace. It is natural for a father to shield his son. He confessed to you. You are going to stand by him while —"

"Carr, as God is my witness, I did not suspect my son until I looked into your eyes out there in the bank a few minutes ago. Then, something seemed to tell me what it was you had come to say — and to do. Now, Adam, I am asking you how much you want. What is your price?"

Adam Carr drew back his arm as if to strike. A savage light leaped into his eyes.

"That's the second time you've asked me that question. I'll answer it this time." He stuck his hands into his coat pockets and faced Mr. Blagden squarely. "I have a price and you'll have to pay it. You'll be a long time doing it, Horace, but it's got to be paid. Once you accused me of being a thief. You drove me out of this town, disgraced. You —"

"I was a boy then, Adam. We are men now. I ask you to overlook that —"

Adam held up his hand. "You have never publicly admitted your error, even though you knew you were wrong. All these years you have allowed Corinth to believe that you are still unconvinced. I want to say to you now that I wouldn't sell the knowledge I have of your son's rottenness for all the money in this bank. You can't pay my price in money, Horace. You can only pay it with suffering. You are a good man. Good men suffer harder than bad men. You had no mercy on your sister. You are pleased to say that she's in hell; that's enough for you. Her children? You — well, we won't speak of them. I suppose you can't help being what you are."

"I am an honest, God-fearing man,— a Christian whose —"

"And like that other God-fearing man, you have a prodigal son. Will you have the courage to kill a fatted calf when he returns to you, blackened with shame, or will you publicly consign him to the devil as you did your sister because she was not good enough to come in for your passover?"

"My boy can be saved. The cases are not the same."

"How about the Widow Payson's boy?"

"Have done with this! What do you mean to do?"

"I am going to put my proofs — and they are unassailable — before the people of Corinth."

Horace eyed him quite calmly. He was master of himself once more, so far as outward appearances were concerned.

"This institution will not prefer charges against the son of its president. I shall restore all of the money that is missing. That will be the end of it."

"Not exactly," said Adam, with a smile. "You forget me. I am going to hunt this world over until I find the thief. Then I shall bring him back to you. It rests with the bank, of course, whether he shall be sent to prison. But I shall do my part, never fear. You can't keep me from hunting him down, and you can't keep me from giving the story to the world. Sit down, Horace. I want to tell you just what I know of your son's actions."

Half an hour later, Adam Carr left the bank. Before five o'clock in the afternoon, representatives of New York and Boston newspapers were in Corinth investigating the report that the son of Horace was a defaulter, and that he had fled.

The whole blighting story of Chetwynd's crime was to find its way into the great newspapers.

Corinth was appalled!

Once more Todville rejoiced, and along the water front the denizens spoke without fear or restraint. The smug little city was shaken as by a monster convulsion.

A Blagden had gone wrong! A *male* Blagden! A son of *The* Blagden at that!

The Corinth *Courier* waited. It had everything to lose and nothing to gain. The editor got very drunk, — and he hadn't been drunk in ten years,— and sent his impotent lamentations to heaven on more than one street corner. He desired all Corinth to know that he couldn't help himself. That was the curse of running a newspaper in a small town. His hands were tied. But he was able to give an excellent demonstration that his tongue was not tied — that is to say, not properly tied.

Before nightfall of that memorable day, the population of Corinth, from extreme youth to doddering old age, knew that Chetwynd Blagden had robbed the bank and had fled, under cover of night, to join a vile temptress in New York,— a vampire in the shape of a woman. Moreover, everyone knew that Horace Blagden had gone up to the "Giant's Castle"— (ghastly misnomer!) — at noon and had not been seen outside its doors since. Hundreds of people went out of their way to walk past the house during the afternoon, casting furtive glances at the windows. Officials of the bank, and of other concerns in which he was interested, telephoned to the house, and each in turn was told that Mr. Blagden could see no one, nor would he speak with anyone.

Mr. Presbrey approached the house at six, confidently expecting to be admitted. He was turned away by the sour-faced Martha, much to his surprise. A couple of curious witnesses at the gate below hurried away, snickering over the minister's rebuff. Mr. Presbrey walked very stiffly up the street, dimly conscious of a shy, evasive sense of elation, admittedly unbecoming in a man of his parts, but singularly insistent, just the same. At his own dinner table that evening, he confided certain beliefs to his wife, chief among them being the opinion that Mr. Blagden was narrow. He even went so far as to question that gentleman's attitude toward the unfortunate children of Mary Midthorne.

"Chickens come home to roost," observed Mr. Presbrey, a remark which may appear vague to the reader of these lines, but not so to Mrs. Presbrey, on whom the inference was not wasted.

Neither of the Midthornes was seen on the streets that day. They kept close to the house, and they spoke in undertones. All through the long afternoon, they wandered through the tomb-like house, occasionally pausing in the hallway near the closed door of their uncle's room to listen for sounds from within. Sometimes they wondered if the two people who confined themselves there were dead or alive. Only at rare intervals were signs of life apparent, such as the shifting of a chair, or the tread of slow-moving feet, or the sharp tapping of finger-nails on the arms of a well-known rocker in which their uncle was wont to sit.

Mr. Blagden, on his return from the bank at noon, had gone directly upstairs, followed by his wife. Ten minutes later he emerged alone. He ordered the servants to come to the library, and there, in the presence of the Midthornes, he announced to the astonished household that his son had transgressed the law and was no longer a member of the family. He gave no details, knowing full well that they would be supplied by willing tongues before the day was over, more expansively than he could have presented them even if he had been inclined to stoop to the task.

"You may go now," he said curtly, to a gaping audience composed of cook, parlour-maid, waitress, gardener and stable-man. He had said all that he intended to say. "Bear in mind what I have said about mentioning my son's name in this house, or in the presence of his mother or myself. It is possible, even likely, that he may be apprehended and — er, ahem! — brought back to Corinth. If such should be the case, I shall not deny him the right to seek the counsel and the help of the two persons who are responsible for his coming into this world. This is his home when he chooses to come back to it in humility and contriteness. But as long as he elects voluntarily to remain a fugitive, a — an outcast, you might say,— just so long shall he be regarded as an enemy to this household. I am his father. If he comes to me for help, for support,— ay, even for love, — I shall not fail him. You may go now."

Turning to Eric and Mary, as the servants filed out, he said: "Your Aunt Rena will not come down to luncheon. If you will sit down, I shall try to tell you as clearly as I can just what it is that Chetwynd has done. I do not expect you to say that you are sorry for him. Perhaps I ought not to expect you to be sorry for his mother or me. I shall merely ask you to be considerate. If you are to gloat over his fall from the pedestal on which we placed him, kindly restrain yourselves in our presence."

At the end of his careful and rather monotonous recital, he lowered his chin and fumbled for a moment with the tassels on the arm of the chair in which he sat facing them.

"My children," he said huskily, "I am a God-fearing man, as you have reason to know. But I am about to defy Him. I shall pray to God that my son may never live to face these charges. I would rather have him take his own life to-day than to continue in the life he has begun to lead."

He arose and, placing a hand on the shoulder of each, looked into their eyes, with a film over his own.

"I would give all I have in the world if my son could have looked me fairly and frankly in the eyes as you have always done. If he could have done that, he would not be where he is to-day."

Eric's gaze wavered for a second, but he managed to keep it steady after a mighty effort of the will. "He would not be where he is to-day!" The words seemed to burn themselves into his very soul.

"Adam Carr will not be turned aside," went on Horace, beginning to pace the floor. "He hates me. He will not rest until he has found — him. There is no way to keep this dreadful thing from going to the public. Before night the newspapers will have it all. It — it will kill your aunt, I fear. To think that her boy may be hounded for years by one so implacable as Adam Carr!" He stopped at the table, and from sheer force of habit, arranged the magazines on the corner, restoring the pile to its accustomed symmetry. His was a well-ordered home. Nothing was ever out of place.

"I — I am sorry, Uncle Horace," murmured the tender-hearted Mary, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Eric stood with bowed head, speechless.

"This should be a lesson to you, Eric," said Mr. Blagden monotonously. "Avoid evil companions at college. Keep away from bad women."

The habit was strong in him.

"Your aunt will be down for dinner. Please bear in mind that no reference is to be made to — to all this. I have told her of the drawing, Eric. She says she has something to tell me when I go back to her. I — I trust it is not something she has felt necessary to hide from me. If I were you, I would not go out on the streets this afternoon. Wait until after nightfall."

He left them, and they heard him slowly mount the stairs. Then the door to his room was closed gently. They did not see him again until dinner time.

By that time, scores of people had called up the house on the telephone, and at least four correspondents had been turned away from the door, only to take up positions across the street with note-books ready. Their cameras got views of the "Giant's Castle" from all sides. One daring chap entered the grounds and photographed the rose-bush that Chetwynd had planted on his seventh birthday, to which some importance was attached because up to that season it had borne white roses, but had been prophetically barren this year.

No less than a dozen eminently veracious citizens had seen young Blagden board a freight train late the previous evening, bound for New York. An unhappy controversy ensued over that very point. No two of them saw him board it at the same place, nor were they all agreed that it was a freight train. Some of them said it was the express train leaving at 6:11, while others mentioned the local at 8:32. John Hawes conversed with the young man in front of Coe's drugstore at seven o'clock, and he was impressed at the time by Chetwynd's nervousness. Mrs. Sanford, of the Second Congregational Church choir, was positive she saw a very blond young woman with him shortly after eight. A strange young woman in Corinth, she was quite sure of that.

Dinner at the Blagden home that night was a dismal affair. Mrs. Blagden, very wan and red-eyed, seldom looked up from her plate. Mr. Blagden rarely looked down from the old-fashioned crystal chandelier, except to inspect the dishes set before him by the solemn Martha.

But four places had been laid. There was no empty chair at the table for the simple reason that it stood back against the wall with others of its kind.

Of the four who sat there in perfunctory obedience to custom, Eric Midthorne was the only one who was not wondering what the missing member of the family was doing at the time. Two of them were tortured by the belief that he was in the arms of the woman who had dragged him out of the sanctuary they had built around him; the third was not so sure that he would not creep back into the house when the night was old and the town asleep.

Eric, alone, knew where Chetwynd Blagden was spending the night.

Shortly after the meal was over, he excused himself and left the house, ostensibly to take a short walk about the grounds. When he was out of sight around the corner of the house, he broke into a run and was soon flying across the garden in the direction of Jabez Carr's cottage. Vaulting the high brick wall at the lower end of the garden, he raced across the meadow and up to the barred gates. There was a light in the window of the gate-keeper's lodge. Eric shouted and rattled the gates to attract attention.

Old Jabez opened the door and peered forth, over his spectacles. He was holding a book in his hand.

"Get away from there!" he roared. "Dang ye, you know it's against orders to let — Hello! Is that you, Eric? What's up, my lad?"

He hurried over to the gate, forgetting his keys in his excitement. Suddenly remembering them, he would have hobbled back for them but for Eric's impatient cry.

"Don't open the gate. Where is Mr. Adam?"

"He's gone to New York, hot on the trail of that young scalawag," said Jabez, lowering his voice as he came up to the gate. "And he'll get him, too, Eric, sure as you're born. They never slip away from Adam when he once gets wind of 'em. I don't mind tellin' you, seein's you don't love your cousin any too well, that Adam's never goin' to rest until he lands him where he belongs. Say, wasn't you plumb laid over on your beam's ends by the news? Gee — al — mighty, I bet there's wailin' and gnashin' of teeth up there in yonder house."

The old man's laugh was almost a cackle, he was so excited.

"He's gone to New York?" cried Eric blankly.

"On the six-something," said Jabez. "Say, just you wait a minute till I get the keys. I've been a-dyin' to talk it over with you."

"I can't stop," said Eric shortly. "Did he say when he was coming back?"

"He won't come till he fetches Chetwynd with him, you can bet on that," said Adam's father grimly. "You ain't likely to see Adam again, my lad, until you see that fine cousin of yours. They'll come back together one of these days. Then, we'll see how Master Horace likes — Hey! What's your hurry? Can't you stay awhile?"

CHAPTER XII

WHO LAUGHS AT LOVE

DAYS passed, and no word came from Adam Carr. The Blagdens lived in constant fear of a telegram announcing the capture of their son. They started with every ring of the telephone bell. The rattle of the knocker on the front door always brought a quick chill of apprehension. Then they would look at each other, inevitably with the same question in their eyes, always with an immediate lowering of the lids.

There was not an hour in their days and their nights in which they were free from the feeling that the front door was about to open to admit their son, and that he would slink in as if no other refuge was open to him.

Adam Carr certainly had laid the foundation for a sublime revenge. The most Machiavellian mind could not have developed a scheme for vengeance so complete as the one which chance had put in his way. Barring the defection of Eric, the Blagdens might go to the end of their days without a single instant of immunity from the plague that hung over their heads.

So long as they lived they would be waiting for the home-coming of Chetwynd.

Adam's unhappy accomplice appreciated all this, and yet could not break the spell that had fallen upon him. He was not blind to the suffering of his uncle and aunt. In his heart he pitied them. He found it easy to convince himself that he had not committed murder. His conscience was clear as to that. Long hours of miserable reflection had brought surcease to his own troubled mind. It was not the thought of Chetwynd that brought remorse to him, but the sight of these tense, unsmiling parents, both of whom, by some miracle of nature, suddenly had grown gentle and considerate toward him and his sister. All the time he knew that he was but an instrument in the hands of Fate, and Fate in this case was Adam Carr.

Sometimes he wondered how long he could maintain this dreadful silence. In his heart, Eric was honest. He realised that he was living part of a great lie and that the time was bound to come when he would burst the bonds that held him and lay the truth before the world. There were moments, indeed, when he felt confession rushing up to his lips, but always it was stayed by the stronger sensation of fear — fear of the scaffold! If Adam Carr was implacable, what of Horace Blagden? How could he hope for mercy at the hands of this over-tortured, humiliated man? Horace Blagden would not rest until he had crushed the slayer of his son, and with him that inscrutable friend and adviser. The law would clamp its jaws on both of them, and that would be an end to it.

Eric was not insensible to the fact that Adam Carr, in the beginning, had been actuated by a feeling of friendship. He did not question the sincerity of the man's motives on that vital day. Nor was there any doubt in his mind that he would prove steadfast and true to the compact made at that time. The conception of the plan to harass Horace Blagden came after that kindly initial impulse. It was something that leaped into existence the moment he had time to think of the possibilities afforded by the extraordinary combination of circumstances. Adam was a man to think quickly, to see far ahead. It was his business, his trade, his training. That he should take advantage of these tragic conditions was distressing, even appalling to Eric, but what could he do in the premises? That Adam might, at any time, betray him was a thought that never entered his mind.

As the days went by, he became more and more reconciled to the situation, tense and trying as it was. He was not happy. The shadow was always present. And yet there was never a time when he could not look his uncle or aunt in the eye, and say to himself that not he, but Chetwynd himself had put the blight on the hearts of these two. He never thought of Mary without experiencing a thrill of relief, almost gladness, that he had a hand, with Fate, in destroying the wretch who would have despoiled her of all that was pure and sweet.

After all, Chetwynd had gone down in a fair fight. It *had* been a duel!

The time was drawing near for his departure for Cambridge. His uncle had made all of the arrangements for his winter. He was to be pleasantly situated amidst such surroundings as only a Blagden could command. If there remained any of the old bitterness in the heart of Horace Blagden, it was being rather skilfully hidden beneath the cloak of kindness.

And yet Eric was not quite sure of his uncle. There were times when he caught the older man looking at him with a strangely penetrating but far-away gaze, from which he usually brought himself up with a start. At such times, the young man was troubled by the vague conviction that Mr. Blagden was looking past him and into the shadow beyond, as if he was trying to materialise the spirits that lurked there in waiting. It was on these occasions that the young man quailed within himself, for it seemed to him that his uncle was actually projecting his mind into direct communication with the spirit of his absent son.

Needless to say, Mr. Presbrey, not at all discouraged by the rebuff of that first distressing day, called on the second, and thereafter every day, including Sundays, for weeks to come. It was somewhat of a shock to him that Mr. and Mrs. Blagden were unwilling to share their troubles with him. In fact, the former so positively declared that his son's name was not to be mentioned in the house he had dishonoured that the minister was for sometime at a loss how to proceed.

If he was not to speak of Chetwynd, in the name of Heaven what was he to talk about? He had come to discuss the cruel pain they suffered. It was very disconcerting not to be able to do so. To be compelled to fall back upon church finances in the face of such an opportunity as this, was not what he had bargained for, and yet, that is precisely what he had to do.

Moreover, to his great amazement, the Blagdens plainly resented a humble desire on his part to do a little more good in the world by offering to devote an hour or two to Eric and Mary, who, he supposed, were liable to neglect in this hour of tribulation.

"I think, Presbrey," said Horace evenly, "that we've been a trifle mawkish."

"Mawkish?" gasped Mr. Presbrey.

"Perhaps that isn't the word," explained the other. "I should have said we've preached at them until there's really nothing left for us to say."

"You mean, that our duty to them has already been fulfilled?"

"I believe they are quite capable of thinking for themselves."

Mr. Presbrey stared. "I trust, Mr. Blagden, you do not contemplate — er — I mean you surely do not mean to say that you are now indifferent to their spiritual needs and welfare."

"Not at all. I think they have weathered all that very nicely."

"I am amazed. For years you have —"

"It is my opinion, Presbrey, that if they are going to be saved they will have to do the greater part of the work themselves."

"But surely, with God's help at their —"

"Adam Carr said something to me once that made a lasting impression. I believe he is right. He said: 'God knows a bad boy as well as anyone else. You don't have to tell Him about it morning, noon and night. It isn't Gospel: it's gossip. It ain't proper to gossip with the Almighty.'"

"My dear sir, I don't see the relevancy. Carr is a scoffer. Surely you are not coming to his way of thinking. It — it is unbelievable."

"Nevertheless, my dear friend, it has occurred to me that if God knows the bad boy, He's equally discerning with respect to the good boy."

"I am quite confident, and always have been, that Eric is a good boy, Mr. Blagden," said Mr. Presbrey stiffly. Mr. Blagden felt the sting in his subtle, far-off criticism.

"Understand me, please, I do not regret the methods we have pursued in showing him the right path. We've done all we could, Presbrey. He will keep to that path if he so desires. If he concludes to wander away from it, I don't believe God or man is going to stop him. It's the thing in here that will keep him straight. God made the strong and he made the weak. They go the way which is easiest. The strong go up, the weak go down. We can't guide them beyond a certain point. They cast us off. The strong don't need us and the weak despise us."

Mr. Presbrey left in a state of great depression. He had suffered what he was tempted to consider a personal loss. A pillar in his temple was wobbling. It was the most impeccable pillar, at that, if the metaphor may be allowed. If Horace Blagden bent ever so slightly, it was extremely doubtful if he, as God's artisan, could hope to restore that portion of the temple to its former strength and usefulness. If Horace saw fit to bend, the whole of the perfect edifice must needs sag with him. Small pillars always are forced to lean in the direction in which they are pushed by the larger ones, and sometimes they crumble and disintegrate.

That was the trouble with the church, the world over, said Mr. Presbrey. Too many monoliths.

And, I am sorry to say, Mr. Presbrey felt that he himself had been very much put upon by Mr. Blagden in the matter of the little Midthornes. Somehow, he always had suspected himself of being a sort of cats-paw. Now he was quite sure of it. Remorse for their treatment of the children seemed to have seized upon the Blagdens. Unless he was mistaken in Mr. Blagden, that gentleman, in chastising himself, was now coolly shifting a rather troublesome burden so that it might appear to rest on other shoulders. In so many words, so to speak, Horace had given him to understand that his prayers would be wasted, that they might just as well be dispensed with. It was rather hard to hear one's earnest prayers catalogued as gossip.

Mr. Presbrey's heart was sore as he strode up the garden path leading to his own doorway. His wife noted the faint flush in his cheeks as he entered the sitting-room.

"Have they had any news of Chetwynd?" she asked.

"My dear," said her husband, sitting down rather heavily, and quite ignoring her question, "I have come to the sorrowful conclusion that it is retribution after all. God can and will punish those who make use of His offices to further their own ends."

She was startled. "Retribution? Ends?"

"Mr. Blagden is paying, I firmly believe, for his unchristian-like treatment of his sister's children. Yes, it is retribution," said he, staring hard at the floor.

"I've always said the time would come," said she, her lips tightening. Her husband had not said it in so many words, but she was shrewd enough to see that his visit had not been a pleasant one. "They are such dear children. And look at Chetwynd! Goodness me!" That was as near to blasphemy as she ever ventured.

Her husband's face brightened. "If — if we had worked as hard over Chetwynd as we did over Eric and Mary, we — well, who knows?"

"We couldn't have saved that boy with all the prayers in Christendom," she announced flatly.

"Oh, my dear! You forget what —"

"I don't forget anything. God himself couldn't save a Blagden if he didn't want to be saved."

"Sh! My dear, that is positively sacri — no, it is worse than sacrilegious. It is profane. I am sorry to hear —"

"Do you know what I'd do, Arthur, if I were in your place?" she interrupted ruthlessly. "I'd have a sermon on this very thing. There is a moral to be taught, an example to be set. I wouldn't be afraid of Horace Blagden."

"I am not afraid of Mr. Blagden," said her husband testily. "I shall not take unfair advantage of him, however. He is in trouble. He needs my private ministrations, not public contumely. No, my dear, I shall go to him to-morrow and the day after. Even such as Horace Blagden can be of contrite heart."

"You might include Rena Blagden," said Mrs. Presbrey. "By the way, what *did* Horace say to you?"

"Sh!" said Mr. Presbrey, with a quick glance in the direction of the dining-room. "Don't speak so loudly. Maggie is setting the table."

"She never repeats anything she hears here, Arthur. Besides, why should we care so long as she is truthful? I have the utmost confidence in Maggie Green. I don't believe that woman ever uttered a falsehood in her life. Oh, that reminds me. She saw Chetwynd on the way to the station that very evening, and spoke to him."

. . . .

"Eric," said Mary, a few days before he went up to Cambridge, "why are you so hateful to Joan? You haven't been near her in weeks, and you seem to avoid her everywhere we go."

"Has she said anything to you about it?" he asked, uncomfortably. He was very unhappy over Joan. The pain that his own resolve had brought upon him was almost more than he could bear. His heart ached for her. Their hour of bliss had been so short, and she, at least, would not understand why it had ended. There were moments when he called himself a brute instead of a martyr.

"She is hurt, Eric, terribly hurt. Honestly, she doesn't seem like the same girl of late. Haven't you noticed that she doesn't come here any more?"

"I am so busy cramming for my exami —" he began lamely, sick at heart.

"Rubbish!" blazed Mary. "You don't have to cram. You're just plain disagreeable, that's all. She has been so nice to me about Miss Sinnox's — and about everything else, too. Why are you so mean to her?"

"I must go up to say good-bye to her," he said, shifting his gaze suddenly.

"And what's worse, *I* don't understand you. We used to go out on Stone Wall every day or two. They were jolly times for me. But now — why, now you won't go near the dear old place with me. You never get any farther than Uncle Jabe's, and I'm tired of feeding the squirrels, if you must know it. We must get over being children sometime, Eric. We can't always feed squirrels and listen to ghost stories. Now, you're going away next week, and I shan't see you till Christmas-time. Won't you just try to be nice and agreeable for awhile? Be nice to Joan, for my sake."

To her astonishment, he turned abruptly and almost ran away from her. She heard the sob that broke through his drawn lips after his back was turned, and she saw the convulsive movement of his shoulders. Then she cried out in wonder and dismay, her dear little heart instantly filled with love and pity, but he did not turn back. Her warm, adorable face went very pale and the tears sprang to the lovely eyes.

The long-expected letter from Adam Carr came that same afternoon. Greatly agitated, Eric refrained from opening it at the house, or in the presence of others, but hurried off to the seclusion of the woods above the town. Here he had spent many hours during the past few weeks, alone with his meditations. The broad green meadows stretched out below the borders of the forest, sinking gently toward the rock-girt coast to the north of Todville on the Point. Here at the edge of the woodland the shade was most inviting on the hot summer days, cooled by the breezes from the sea, and moist with the breath of ferns and the mosses. The blazing sun of midday never penetrated this sheltered area, nor were its rays intense enough to shrivel the bright green grass that carpeted the sunken meadows.

Eagerly he devoured the news from his strange adviser and accomplice. Adam wrote from New Orleans, where he had gone, he said, in connexion with a matter quite foreign to the Blagden affair. He was writing, however, to the president of the bank to inform him that the defaulter had sailed for a port at present unknown to him, but that "time would tell." There was a grim, relentless humour in his reference to Chetwynd's whereabouts. Of course (he went on), Eric had kept himself informed as to the earlier features of the investigation and the chase. He must have seen in the newspapers that Bunnie De Vinne quite readily satisfied the authorities, as well as himself, that she knew absolutely nothing of young Blagden. She was particularly eager to have it known that she had not been "keen about him" at any time. Indeed, she averred, in a language of her own, Chetwynd made her tired and she had chucked him weeks before the smash-up. She admitted that he had spent a neat bit of money on her, but that it wasn't a marker to what other girls were getting. In fact, it really wasn't much more than pin money, as the wind was blowing in other quarters. Miss De Vinne, with an asperity that did not go very well with her scornful attitude, gave it as her belief that Chetwynd had taken up with a girl named Blanche Something-or-other, she couldn't recall her last name, which wasn't her own, anyway.

Adam went on to say that he had made it a point to ferret out Miss Blanche Some-thing-or-other. He found her on the road with a big burlesque show, making Philadelphia and Boston as side steps from Broadway. Her contract, it seems, stipulated that she was to go no farther away from New York than these two cities, and she was to play in no one-night stands. She had a very small salary, but diamond-pin money. It was not difficult for her to prove that she knew nothing of young Blagden's whereabouts. He certainly was not "trailing her."

In the concluding paragraph of this unsatisfying letter, Adam very briefly expressed the hope that Eric's first year in Harvard would be a splendid one. Rather grimly he suggested that the "first year is always the hardest to get through, no matter what you're undertaking. After that, it's easy." Proceeding, he urged him to allow no outside influences to worry him, but to devote all his time and energies to the work ahead. Then he signed himself, "Your staunch friend until death, Adam Carr," underlining the words "until death."

It was Adam's way of convincing his friend that his secret was safe.

Eric re-read the letter several times, conscious of a primal disappointment that gradually gave way before a sense of security in view of the really subtle wording of the epistle. Adam told him everything, and yet to the casual observer there was nothing to be seen between the lines. Of one thing Eric could be sure: the man meant to keep up the travesty of hounding Horace Blagden's son until he tired of the sport, after which it would be a simple matter to end it all by producing evidence of his quarry's death in some obscure corner of the world.

The young man folded the sheets and was restoring them to the envelope when his attention was attracted by a sound near at hand,— a sound as of someone stealthily moving in the fern banks beyond the tree against which he leaned his back. He whirled and partially rose to his feet, a vast sense of alarm assailing him.

Not twenty feet away stood Joan Bright, her gaze full upon him. Something in her eyes told him that she had been standing there for some time, shy and uncertain as to whether she should accost him or flee the place in confusion. He came to his feet in an instant, paling and flushing by turns. Her serious dark eyes wavered and the lids were lowered for a second; then she met his gaze resolutely.

"I saw you from the road, Eric," she said simply. He was struck by the hurt, appealing look in her eyes. It shamed him. "What have I done, Eric? What has happened to — to —" She flushed piteously and could not go on.

He sprang forward, clasping the hands that were raised as if to ward him off.

"Oh, Joan," he cried, casting his resolve to the winds, "I haven't changed, I swear I haven't. I love you a thousand times more than I ever did. I — I would die for you. It breaks my heart to have you feel as you do —"

She broke in plaintively: "What have I done, Eric?"

"You? What have *you* done?" The tears were swimming in his eyes. She withdrew one of her hands, but only to lay it tenderly against his cheek. "You ought to hate me, Joan. I've been a beast to treat you as I have. But I couldn't do otherwise. I had to do it. I can't let you go on loving me."

She drew away from him, as if he had struck her in the face. Her eyes grew wide with pain and wonder.

"You — you mean, Eric, you don't want me for your sweetheart any longer?" she said, scarcely above a whisper. That piteous look was more than he could bear.

"I love you — Oh, how I love you," he cried. "I shouldn't have said that to you. I — I don't know what I am saying. I *do* want you. I shall always want you. Don't cry, Joan — please don't! I'll — I'll get down on my knees and beg you to forgive —"

She came up to him swiftly, her eyes gleaming through the tears of vanquished shame, her lips tremulous with a smile of perplexity. Her hands, both of them, were pressed to his lips, cutting short the sentence.

"I don't understand you, Eric. How queer you are. Don't you know — don't you *know* that I want you to be — to be what you said you'd be. My sweetheart. Oh, Eric, I've been so miserable. Something has happened. You must tell me."

He kissed her fingers hungrily. Then he clasped her slim, yielding body in his strong young arms and kissed her lips again and again. Her arm went up about his neck and everything was forgotten.

Slowly he came to his senses. He held her away from him, still panting from the fervour of his wild, uncontrolled passion.

"Listen, Joan," he began dully, at a loss for words. "I — I ought not to hold you to your promise. You don't know —"

She gave him a ravishing smile. Surely, in all the world, there was no one so lovely as Joan Bright in that wonderful moment.

"I don't see how you can help yourself," she cried. "I shall hold you to yours. How can you say such a thing to me after — after this?"

Suddenly her eyes grew dark with doubt and misgiving. Something in his white, drawn face smote out the light in her eyes.

"What is it, Eric? Tell me," she said.

He shook his head, dumb with despair.

"Sit down here with me, dear," she went on. "I don't care what it is, it can't change my feeling toward you. Nothing can do that."

They sank to the soft, green turf, his arm about her shoulders, his back against the tree. She waited a long time for him to speak. It seemed to him that she was holding her breath.

"You — you said we were sweethearts, Eric," she breathed. "I believed you. Didn't you mean it?"

Unconsciously he gripped her hand so tightly that it must have hurt her, yet she did not appear to feel the pain.

He was at the point of blurting out the whole devastating truth. His honest soul saw no other way out of it. It was right and just that she should know, that she should understand why he had behaved so strangely toward her.

Then he remembered his compact with Adam Carr.

He recalled his friend's cold, almost soulless admonition: "Don't let this little accident of yours alter a single purpose or hope you now may cherish. Go on, just as if it hadn't happened. It wasn't the strength of your arm that did it, but the weakness of that blamed railing." He was never to forget that speech. Part of it was like Adam Carr, part of it reminded him not a little of Mr. Presbrey, incongruous as it may appear.

"Of course, I meant it," he cried, his handsome young face aglow with the rebound of blood. "I'm never going to give you up, Joan. I'm not afraid any longer. Something happened not long ago — I can't tell you what it was — that made it look as though I couldn't go on being the same. It almost killed me. Something that made it appear wrong for me to — to go on, that's all. But what's the use going on with anything, if I can't have you to think of, to look up to, to wait for and to work for? You're everything, Joan, everything, and always will be."

She was smoothing his hair with a timid, loving hand. Somehow, the gentle caress was rubbing away the troubles that clogged his brain. The world was growing brighter.

"Was — was it what happened to Chetwynd?" she asked softly.

He started guiltily. The look in his eyes passed in a second, however. "It had something to do with it," he said, with an involuntary glance toward the sea.

"Why should it make any difference to us?" she asked quickly. "You are not to blame for the awful things he did."

"I know," he admitted uncomfortably.

"Was it because you thought I — or father, for that matter,— would let *that* alter our opinion of you?"

He smiled wearily, stroking her hand.

She went on eagerly: "It couldn't be so, Eric. Father thinks you are the finest boy he knows. He never approved of Chetwynd. You couldn't possibly be the — the same as he."

"But, you know they all prophesy a worse ending for me," he said gloomily, without realising that his secret thoughts were crowding to the surface.

"Pooh!" she cried. "I know what you mean. Mary has told me all the things they've said to you. But that can't happen. You — why, Eric, dear, you just couldn't kill anybody. You are too tender and sweet-hearted. Oh, I know you!" She kissed the brown fingers that were convulsively carried to her lips.

The fingers of the very hand that sent Chetwynd against the treacherous railing!

A low, mocking laugh came from the wood behind them, a laugh that brought a rush of icy perspiration through every pore in Eric's body. He whirled and peered into the shadows, his lips parted in a sort of stupefying horror.

It was the mean, never-to-be-forgotten laugh of Chetwynd Blagden!

The girl drew back in amazement.

"What is it, Eric?" she cried.

"Didn't you hear it?" he gasped.

"Hear what?"

"The laugh. Good heavens, Joan, *didn't* you hear it?"

"No, you silly boy. You must be dreaming," she cried merrily.

He could see no one among the trees. They were absolutely alone. He sank back against the tree, limp and weak. Passing his hand over his wet forehead, he muttered:

"I — I thought I heard — but I must have been mistaken. There is no one, is there?"

"There are some men repairing the bridge at Bud's Rock," she said. "I saw them this morning. But that is half a mile away. They are putting up new railings."

He arose abruptly. "Come," he said nervously, "let's go home, Joan. It's later than I thought."

They hurried off across the smooth, green meadow, into the hot sunshine. He led her directly away from the cool, inviting shade of the wood, ignoring her protests.

"It's shorter this way," he argued lamely, but that afforded slight content to her. He was clasping her hand in his and he was saying over and over again, as much to himself as to her: "We *will* be sweethearts always. Nothing can ever come between us now, Joan."

"As if there could be any danger of that," she said simply.

The third day after this meeting at the edge of the wood, Eric departed for Cambridge, firm in his decision to let nothing stand in the way of his happiness with Joan Bright.

But he was not soon to get over the shock of the imaginary laugh that came to him from nowhere, from no one in this world.

CHAPTER XIII

HORACE WRITES A LETTER

At the end of four years, Eric Midthorne came out of Harvard. He prepared at once for the examinations of the Beaux Arts in Paris and passed them successfully, standing high among the Americans who went through.

During the summer of his twenty-first year, and while he was still an undergraduate at Cambridge, his uncle, after divulging the nature of the legacy which was to fall to him, spent hours out of each day in counselling the young man as to the wisest and best way to make the most of his grandfather's bequest. There would be more than one hundred thousand dollars coming to him. A solid nest egg, Mr. Blagden was wont to remark, notwithstanding the fact that the funds were so diversely invested that Eric was once inclined to observe, with ill-timed facetiousness, that it might be better to call it a scrambled egg. His Uncle Horace repaid the effort with a pained, yet tolerant frown, as if to say: "Harvard is not what he was in my day." He always spoke of his alma mater in the masculine sense, because, he argued, the college was named for and after a man, not a woman. Merely a little stitch in the character of Horace Blagden.

On his twenty-first birthday, Eric found himself not only a man, but a free agent insofar as his inheritance was concerned. There were bonds and mortgages, bank stocks and building-lots, to say nothing of holdings in nearly every public utility concern in the city of Corinth.

"You will have an income of nearly ten thousand dollars," announced Horace, after filing his final report as guardian. In other words, the best New England rates. That is what it came to.

"Uncle Horace," said Eric, as they left the courthouse together, "I feel that I owe you a great deal that cannot be repaid in thanks. You have spent a great deal of money in caring for Mary and me —"

Horace checked him with a gesture. "Pray do not labour under the delusion, Eric, that you and Mary have been — er, ahem — subsisting on charity. You did not pay strict attention to the reading of my final report, I fear. It is a very bad habit to get into. Always pay attention to such things. My report, as usual, sets forth all the expenditures for the year. You will find, if you examine it even casually, that you owe nothing to me — er — ahem! — I mean in a substantial way. I shall be fully repaid by an expression of gratitude."

He was unconsciously ironic. Not for the world would he have had it appear so. It was his way of informing Eric that he had charged up his "board and keep," through all those years, to running expenses.

"You mean," said Eric, a trifle dazed, "that Mary and I have *paid* for — for what we've had from you?"

"Precisely."

"I — I wish I had known that long ago," muttered the young man, staring straight before him, his jaws set.

"I want to set you straight as to one thing, Eric," said his uncle steadily. He took the young man's arm in his hand, an unprecedented bit of informality on his part. "I fear that you may conceive the idea that I am niggardly in this matter. Believe me, *I* am the one who pays. I am the one who filed the reports — open reports, mind you — showing that I have charged up to my own sister's children the cost of their food, their clothes, their bringing-up. The whole of Corinth knows that I have done this thing. So, you see, I get my pay in the sneers that pass behind my back — yes, sometimes in these later days, before my eyes. But I had an understanding with myself when I took you into my home years ago, in face of the opposition of your shiftless relatives in the South. I did not intend you to come as charity wards, so to speak. I did not love you sufficiently well to bestow charity upon you. To be frank, I resented you both bitterly. But, I am a fair man. Your Southern relatives were proud. They would not have had you become objects of charity. I told them that a Blagden was never an object of charity. A Blagden would pay for his own out of his own. You are Blagdens, both of you. To-day you can look me in the face and say that you do not owe me a dollar. You are independent, Eric. I have seen to it that you who came to me against your will, who remained in my house all these years because you could not help yourself,— I say I've seen to it that you are under no pecuniary obligation to me. You have paid me, out of your inheritance, for everything you have received, and so has Mary."

"Uncle Horace, I —"

"Just a moment, please. I am not so penurious as you think. My will has been made, Eric, these many years. In it there is a special clause, restoring to you every penny of the money I used in the payment of these — er, ahem! — fixed charges, you might say. I say it is a special clause, because during the last year I altered my will in one other and somewhat vital particular. I will not go into that, however."

His lean grey face hardened as he uttered the last sentence; a far-away look came into his eyes.

"But I can't think of taking back"— began Eric, all at sea over the strange turn of affairs.

"You can't help yourself, my boy," said Horace Blagden, kindly. "Sit down here with me on this bench. It's cool here, and of late the sun appears to be affecting me oddly. Eric, your aunt and I are proud of you. In spite of ourselves, we have always liked you and Mary. If we were harsh with you, it was because we were envious — even jealous. It isn't so hard to say that, either. And, believe me, there was a time when we honestly feared for your future. That is why —" here a thin smile broke on his lips,—"we set Mr. Presbrey on you. I hope you will forgive us that. And yet, don't misunderstand me, I believe he did you more good than you will admit. Well, you are twenty-one. You are going to be a credit to all of us — living and dead. Your middle name is Blagden, don't forget that. I say we are proud of you. My boy, it is more than that with me. I am fond of you. I will not say that your aunt is not quite as much so — er, ahem! — as I am. I want you to know that I love you for your fairness, your gentleness, your honesty. You are a good boy, Eric. I would to God you were my son."

Eric was dumbfounded. An older and keener judge of human nature would not have been deceived into believing that a generous impulse moved Horace to that unhappy lament. It was an exposition of the quintessence of selfishness. He was thinking only of a personal gain that had been denied him in Nature's distribution. But Eric did not know this. He was touched by the unhappy cry from the great man's soul. A sudden desire came over him to lift the dreadful suspense that was hanging over his uncle's head.

"Uncle Horace, I want to tell you something that may make it easier for you about — Chetwynd. It has been a —"

Mr. Blagden turned on him coldly.

"Stop right there!" he said without raising his voice, but with a look in his eyes that served better than a shout of command. "You are not to mention his name, sir. I have told you so before. There is nothing you can say that will make — But there! I am forgetting myself. We will resume our talk concerning your investments. They are safe and sound, and I sincerely hope you will condescend to manage them as carefully as I have done, as your guardian, and as your grandfather did before me. Do not put your fortune into the hands of the Jews. It is safe enough in Corinth. By Jews I mean the tendrils of New York. They suck up gold as the plants suck in the dew. I hate a Jew. Have you noticed there are no Jews in Corinth?"

"A Jew couldn't live in Corinth, Uncle," said Eric, who hated the town. "He'd starve to death."

His uncle closed one eye and a grim smile showed itself faintly at the corners of his mouth.

"I fancy he would," said he. "It is a far cry from Corinth to New York."

"Why shouldn't I leave my affairs in your hands, Uncle, just as they have been?" Eric observed after a moment's reflection. "I'd only ask for a certain portion of the income — enough to live on, you see. Is it asking too much of you, sir? "

Horace laid his hand on the young man's knee. "I think they would be safer in my hands than in yours, my boy. At least, for a few years. I will continue to look after them for you on the condition that you agree in writing to — er — ahem! — to allow me absolute control over them."

"For a certain length of time, sir," said Eric steadily. "I believe I can manage for myself when I am a little older."

"Quite right. We'll say five years. You will be married by that time, I daresay."

Eric blushed. He had been with Joan Bright that very morning.

"Who knows? " he mused evasively.

And so it was agreed between them that Horace Blagden was to have control of Eric's fortune for a term of years. A business transaction, pure and simple, said Mr. Blagden, in which he proposed to serve as agent at a much lower rate of compensation than Eric could hope to obtain from the Jews. It was quite a satisfactory arrangement all around, for Eric would not have had him act without compensation.

Eric was past twenty-two when he prepared for the Beaux Arts. He was to be abroad for at least two years. Long before he completed his work at Harvard, he was promised a commission — his first real work as an architect and builder.

Judge Bright was to be his first client. The young man was to design and build for him a new and magnificent home in Upper Corinth, a structure that would cost no less than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

"I'd sooner entrust the job to you, Eric, than to any of those chaps in Boston, with all their training and prestige," said the Judge to the surprised and overwhelmed under-graduate. "You've got ideas, and that's what I want. Think over the plans while you're in Paris, and, in case you write to Joan, who is the one you'll have to please, after all, discuss them with her. She's got ideas, too."

Of course, when the news got abroad in Corinth that a boy of twenty-four was to build Judge Bright's palatial residence, the like of which Corinth had never seen except as a trespasser, there was a general sniff of amazement. More than one of the selectmen and practically the entire congregation of the First Congregational Church remonstrated with the Judge, admitting that it was none of their business, of course, and declaring that they liked Eric, and all that, and that he would be a great architect *some day*, but for heaven's sake, et cetera, et cetera.

Joan was not so pessimistic.

"I'll help you with the plans, Eric," she announced blissfully. "We must make no mistake. It must be perfect in every respect. Because, don't you see, you and I will live in it some day."

Eric held up his hands in horror. "Joan, Joan! Do you really think I'll *live* in Corinth after I've got a good start in the world? Do you think I'd bury myself and you here?"

"It's a nice old place," she protested.

"So is the world a nice old place. We'll go out and live in it somewhere."

"But papa's building this house for me," she lamented.

He looked glum. "It's a deuce of a dilemma. I can't give you up and I won't give up the commission."

"Well, why should we borrow trouble?" she cried gaily. "Father will live in it for years and years. We can spend some of our time with him, Eric. We must. And, listen! I have it. When we're quite old we can close it in the winter and let it in the summer!"

We must not forget Adam Carr. It would not be fair to him, if we pause but for a moment to consider his own capacity for not forgetting. There were months during which Eric heard nothing of the man, then suddenly he would appear, as if from nowhere, calmly to resume relations as if they had separated no longer ago than the night before. He would drop in on the young man at his rooms in Cambridge, always without warning but never by any chance when he was away or when he had company there. Or he would be sitting in the shade of the trees that surrounded old Jabez Carr's watch-house above Todville, quite as if he always had been sitting there, smoking a pipe with his father and staring intently at the squirrels that never quite got over being afraid to approach him. Or, again, he would come upon Eric in a New York thoroughfare, never saying "how-do-you-do," but always beginning a conversation with some remark which fitted in precisely with the thoughts that were in the young man's mind at the moment. It was uncanny, and yet Eric never experienced a single sensation of uneasiness or repulsion. Somehow, it seemed to him that Adam Carr was so much a part of his own existence that he was with him in spirit at all times, no matter how great the distance that separated their bodies.

Once, just before commencement day, Adam appeared on the campus. He came up from behind and spoke to Eric, who turned without surprise, as though he had been aware of his presence all the time. You would have thought he was continuing a conversation that had not been diverted for a moment, much less by a lapse of five months or more.

"I guess Horace has about given up hope of Chetwynd ever turning up to be forgiven," he remarked, in the most casual manner.

Again, one night in the Champs Elysees, he came upon the young American unexpectedly.

"What's the news from Corinth?" he asked, without preamble, speaking as if from the darkness. Eric turned to find his queer friend standing at his elbow, idly gazing at the gaudy retinue of King Sasowith of Cambodia, who was returning, with all his wives and concubines, from Pre Catalin, where he had been the unit of attraction since the sun went down.

This time, Eric confided to the detective that the situation was "getting on his nerves."

"I'm so sorry for them that I've half a mind to tell the truth, Mr. Adam," he said, in the course of conversation. "Why, they're simply grieving their hearts out. It would be the greatest blessing in the world if they knew that he could never come back."

Adam chuckled. "I suppose you think old Horace would fall on your neck and say thank you kindly, eh? Well, he wouldn't, my boy. He'd see to it that you fell on your own neck, after a drop of five or six feet. Be patient. Before long I'll report to him that Chetwynd is no more. It may interest you to know that I drop Horace a line occasionally to let him know that I'm still on the look-out for his erring off-spring. It's getting to be somewhat of a tax on me, writing these letters. I've always hated to write letters. One of these days,— soon, perhaps,— I'll get so tired of it that I'll put an end to our one-sided correspondence by announcing that Chetwynd is dead. Jumped overboard just as I was about to nab him on a ship somewhere in the Atlantic. Body not recovered. See? That will end it all, and Horace can sleep in peace."

"For heaven's sake, do it soon, Mr. Adam."

"I'll think it over."

"You are a hard man."

"But not so hard as Horace Blagden."

"He is changed."

"Umph!"

Regular letters came to Eric from his sister and from Joan,— airy, newsy ones from Mary, loving ones with no news in them from Joan. The greatest piece of news that came from Mary, who dealt with it by the page, and which was briefly treated by Joan, was the staggering information that the congregation had asked for Mr. Presbrey's resignation. This news came while Eric was in Munich, completing a brief course of study in that city, some little time before he was to return to America. He had gone first to Vienna and then to Munich, after finishing the course at the Beaux Arts.

From all that he could make out of the disconnected, almost exuberant letter, Mr. Presbrey had undertaken to put himself and God over and above Horace Blagden in the management of the church, with dire consequences to at least one of the allies. (I am quoting Mary almost literally.) It seemed that Mr. Presbrey misconstrued a certain listlessness on the part of the great man of Corinth; he took it that Mr. Blagden was losing his force as a dominant leader, that he no longer held the reins in a rigid grip, so to speak. The worthy pastor took heart. He assumed an independence that, through cultivation, grew rapidly into arrogance. He openly defied Horace at a time when it seemed most unlikely that that gentleman would rise from the ashes of his hopes to take issue with him.

The controversy had a trivial beginning. Mr. Presbrey "took sides" in a choir squabble. The soprano and the tenor, it appears, quarrelled over the proper way to interpret a duet in one of the Easter anthems. The fact that it was a contralto and bass duet doesn't seem to have mattered, although you'd think it would. The bass and the contralto were not consulted. They were ignored. Fortunately for the congregation, they sung it in their own sweet way and no one was aware of the fact that the anthem was ruthlessly spoiled until it became known that the soprano and tenor were not on speaking terms with each other.

Then the pews began to take notice of the dissension in the loft. Inside of a fortnight, the entire congregation was involved. Mr. Presbrey came out flat-footed for the tenor, who, on week-days, gave vocal lessons in respectable support of a teacher in the Sunday school,— his wife, by the way,— and did not smoke nor drink. Moreover, he advised his pupils to abstain from smoking and drinking. Neither habit was good for the voice, he explained. The soprano, on the other hand, was a good-looking young woman, who went to Boston twice a week to *take* lessons, and who spent all she earned on hats and things to bedeck herself with, so that the men in the pews would think she could sing, though their wives told them she couldn't. Also she was given to singing secular songs of a rather buoyant character at public entertainments in the opera house, and she had spent an entire season in the chorus of the English Opera Company in Boston, ostensibly for the training it was said, but, according to certain ladies in the congregation, in the hope that she might some day be requested to appear in tights. The soprano was conscious of a very good figure.

Well, to get back to Mary's letter: Mr. Blagden suddenly threw off his lethargy. The soprano, it so happened, had been elevated to the choir on his recommendation, and as he paid the weekly salaries of the quartette out of his own purse, no one had the right to object to his selection, although nearly every woman in the church knew of someone better qualified than Miss Smith. And so, in the midst of the petty strife, Horace, like the big man that he was, snapped his fingers smartly and the whole congregation scurried back to the fold in a most amiable way. The surprised Mr. Presbrey was left alone, a shorn, stark figure to face the result of his convictions.

He resolved to stand his ground. The soprano must go. Likewise the fiddler who came in occasionally to play obligatos to her solos. The First Congregational Church was not a dance house.

To the intense amazement of everyone, he bluntly announced in open meeting that a new soprano would be engaged for the ensuing quarter. Horace could hardly believe his ears.

"Miss Smith is hired by the year, Mr. Presbrey," he said stiffly, arising from his seat in Congregational-meeting.

"I trust you will pardon the liberty I take in reminding you, Mr. Blagden, that she is not hired by the congregation," remarked the minister, mildly.

Horace responded with his wintry smile. "By the same token, she should be dismissed by the person who hires her."

"A change is absolutely necessary, sir."

Horace was thoughtful for a moment. "I understand they need a soprano in the Second Church. If you insist on her leaving this church, I shall be very glad to recommend her for the position there."

The threat in these words was too thinly veiled to escape the attention of the members who filled the chapel. No matter how gravely they had divided against each other in the choir squabble, they became a unit of apprehension in view of the catastrophe that suddenly loomed up before them.

If Miss Smith went to the Second Church, there also would go the mighty Blagdens. And then, what would become of the mortgage on the church?

Someone sprang to his feet and suggested that the matter be deferred for a fortnight or so. Mr. Presbrey had the temerity to say the Second Church could have Miss Smith and be welcome to all she could bring with her.

That was the beginning. It went from bad to worse, Mr. Presbrey finally resorting to personalities. He said that it was time to throw off the yoke. Mr. Blagden, he explained, was scarcely the one to regulate the policies of a great church when one stopped to consider the unhappy results of his efforts to bring up his own son in Christ. Moreover, had it not been for the intervention of himself and Mrs. Presbrey, those two excellent young persons, the Midthornes, might have been hectored into a natural defiance of all the laws of God and man, simply because the home influences that surrounded them were not calculated to inspire gentleness of spirit or contriteness of heart.

With an equal chance, Chetwynd could have been saved, but no! The parents of that young man stood between him and the true agents of God. They set themselves over against their closed gates and said to God's minister: "Hands off. This is ours."

At this juncture, Horace, pallid as a ghost, arose from his chair and, without looking to right or left, stalked from the chapel, followed by his wife, whose whitened head was bent and whose limbs tottered.

The next day, bright and early, Horace Blagden sent out a command to the officers and chief men of the First Church. They obeyed, and three o'clock found all of them gathered in the private offices of the banker. They came away from that meeting with grave faces and troubled hearts, but just the same, they affected no sign of hesitancy in asking Mr. Presbrey for his resignation.

The minister was dumbfounded. He had known all along that he was kicking against the pricks but, to quote Uncle Jabez Carr, "he didn't know there was a mule waitin' to kick back when he was a-lookin' t'other way."

Mr. Presbrey refused to resign. A great hullabaloo ensued. Corinth had never known the like of it. Todville chuckled, and, to a man, came out for Mr. Presbrey. The same spirit inflated the narrow by-ways along the water-front until they were ready to burst with acclaim. Notwithstanding Mr. Presbrey's rigorous efforts to reform that section of town, or to obliterate it entirely, the saloon-keepers, the brothel-house owners, and the human dregs of Corinth joyfully took sides with him in the fight against Horace Blagden, a rather anomalous condition, you may say, but perfectly natural if you pause to consider the relative influence of the two contenders. Lower Corinth had no fear of God, but it slunk away from Horace Blagden. Therefore, if it could destroy Horace, there would be *Nothing* to fear.

A subsequent letter from Mary informed Eric that Mr. Presbrey was to open a school for boys on the old Dexter farm, just above Corinth. A youngish man from Boston was likely to be called to the First Church. He had preached for two Sundays on trial and Uncle Horace was quite enthusiastic over him.

Few and far between were the letters the young man received from his uncle. They were always of a business nature, absolutely undeviating in that respect. Drafts from dividends, reports on properties, and matters of that sort. There never was a letter from Aunt Rena. She made no effort to be friendly.

But one day, a month before he was to sail for home, Eric received from his uncle a letter that sorely disturbed his peace of mind. It revived the old dread that grew up with him from childhood and which had lain dormant for the past few years — the dread of the prophecy concerning himself and Mary. He had killed his man. That much of it was fulfilled. Now, what of Mary? Was she to fulfil her part of the ugly prophecy?

His uncle, after apologising for calling his attention to the unpleasant matter to follow, wrote:

"I am very glad to hear that you are coming home. It is not, as I have stated before in this letter, my custom to interfere in the affairs of others. Since you and Mary reached an age that warranted the belief that you would be capable of thinking soundly for yourselves, I have not undertaken to obtrude my opinions, much less to offer criticism of any act or impulse.

You, Eric, I knew to be level-headed and steady. I have had no fears for you. Regarding Mary, I cannot speak so confidently. She is wayward and she is extremely pretty. The combination is not as desirable as it may seem, as viewed from the vantage point of an older head. We have tried to keep the path she traverses clean and free from contaminating influences. But she sees fit to resent our thoughtful consideration. I am not pretending to you, even delusively, that she has overstepped the bounds of propriety in any sense of the term. I believe Mary to be a good girl and pure-minded.

"You recall young Payson. He is now, as you doubtless know, living in New York, where he has a position with a large bond house — a responsible position, I hear. He belongs to several clubs and is what is termed a man about town. The influences of Corinth seem to have deserted him. I am not questioning his integrity. That privilege was denied me long ago. I was mistaken about him once, I shall not fall into error again. I did him a grievous wrong. Had it not been for the arrogant demands of Adam Carr, I should have been inclined to restore him to his position in the bank. But that was not to be considered. I owe nothing to the generosity of Adam Carr. He is my enemy.

"Now to come to the point. Mary, who will soon be twenty-one, has taken a great fancy to this young man. He visits his mother here regularly and, while I cannot ask him to come to my home, Mary sees him frequently and in a clandestine manner. Your aunt and I have remonstrated, but to no avail. She goes about with him when the occasion presents itself. She rides in his automobile with strange men and women from New York,— flashy women who drink and smoke.

I am sorry to say that she seems to be estranged from her friend and old-time companion, Joan Bright. The inference is plain. Joan does not approve of John Payson and his friends. We see but little of her in these days. A few nights ago Mary came home from an all-day trip — on a Sabbath — and your aunt distinctly smelt the odour of wine on her breath.

"Last week I met Payson in Corinth. Realising that it was better for everyone concerned, I politely asked him to come to my house to see Mary. We would be glad to welcome him there. He calmly informed me that he would not put foot inside my gates, not in a million years, or something to that effect. Whereupon I notified him that he could not continue his attentions to my niece unless he were manly enough to visit her in the home of her protectors. I will not repeat what he said in response to this. Suffice to say, he insulted me. He did not hesitate to say that he would see Mary when he pleased and as he pleased.

"I do not like this young man. He is not all that he should be. Judge Bright, once his friend, now says that he belongs to a fast set in New York, and has been spoiled by prosperity and adulation. I am quite sure that he means to marry your sister if she will have him. He knows that she will come into a fortune soon. He is a reckless speculator, I am told. I fear for her interests more than I can tell you.

"You know him. I leave it to you as to whether he is altogether the man you would choose to be the husband, or even the lover, of your sister.

"In bringing this matter to your attention, I will go a bit beyond the bounds of reticence. Do you know his history? Do you know why Adam Carr takes such a deep interest in him? Do you know whose son he is?

These are questions that will confront you. I could answer all of them, but will not.

"I will simply say that he is not to be thought of as a husband for Mary, and in saying so to the son of Philip Midthorne, who was a gentleman born, I feel that my convictions are not without weight in your estimation.

"As I said before, I rejoice that you are coming home. You, and you alone, can influence Mary. She must not be permitted to go on in this affair. Do not write to her of what I am telling you. Her resentment might lead her to do the very thing we are seeking to prevent by diplomacy and tact. She is lovable and she adores you. You can save her, Eric.

"Jack Payson will do all that he can to hurt me. He has never forgiven me. He would take her, honourably or otherwise, merely to have the chance to gloat over me.

"Your devoted uncle,
"HORACE BLAGDEN."

CHAPTER XIV

LET THERE BE LIGHT

When Eric came down the gang plank at the pier in New York City, the one familiar face that met his gaze belonged to Adam Carr. The square, stubborn figure of the detective was at the bottom of the slip, and no amount of jostling disturbed it.

"I've got news for you," was his greeting, as Eric extended his hand.

"And I have a question or two to put to you, Mr. Adam," said the young man promptly.

"I suppose you want to ask me about Jack Payson," observed Adam as they moved off toward the "M" section. "I thought you'd be wanting to get at the facts. First, let's hustle your stuff through these fellows here. I've got it fixed so that you won't be delayed. Little pull."

"Thanks. What is your news?"

"Your sister is in New York."

"In New York? How — what do you mean? Is she here to meet me?"

"Not exactly that. I think she's here to avoid meeting you."

Eric turned icy cold. People stared at him as he reached blindly for the support of one of the posts.

"For God's sake —" he began hoarsely, and could go no farther. His eyes asked all the questions that were necessary.

"I've got a cab outside. We'll talk about it as we drive up. Be calm. Everything's all right with her, I'm sure. She's staying with friends. Old Horace didn't know how to handle her, that's all. She's like a spirited, thoroughbred horse. He went a step too far into her private affairs."

"You mean, she's — she's left Corinth — left my uncle's house?" cried Eric.

"She had to. Any girl of spirit would have done the same."

"But why did you say she was here to avoid meeting me? What is wrong? What has she done?"

Destiny! Fore-ordination! The promises of their childhood! All of these rushed across his mind in horrid review. His heart was like lead.

"Oh, it was wrong to leave her," he groaned, before the other could reply. "I am to blame if anything has happened —"

"People are staring at you, Eric. Pull yourself together. I guess I was too sudden. It's a fault I have. You've got a wrong impression, I see. She's all right. Don't worry. I should have said she wanted to avoid meeting you in Corinth. She's done with Corinth forever. Here's the inspector."

Half an hour later, they were on their way up town in a hansom. A fine drizzle was blowing in their faces as they leaned back in the seat, neither of them caring to have the glass lowered.

"Now I'll answer your questions about Jack Payson," said Adam quietly.

"I want to know about Mary. What's happened?"

"Well, she eloped a week or ten days ago. She's of age now and can do as she pleases."

"In heaven's name, why did she leave Corinth? What is she doing in New York? Where is she —"

"Give me time, my lad. Horace objects to Jack

Payson, that's the sum and substance of it. He's never got over the fact that he did the boy a wrong. You know and he knows that Jack was not guilty of robbing the bank, but Horace hates him simply because he didn't do it. Jack's all right. He has done well in New York. Godsend to him to get out of Corinth. He wants to marry your sister. Hold on! Don't fly off the handle now. He may not have as much blue blood in him as you have, but he's got plenty of honest red blood, and he's a man, in spite of Horace. He's square and he's good enough for any woman, if you can say that of any man. He —"

"I don't know anything about him. Who was his father? Does anyone know? Do you know?"

Adam's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and he was slow in replying.

"Be blunt about it. You want to know if he was born — straight. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's it."

"If his mother was straight?"

"Yes. And why *you* have always been so deeply interested in him," blurted out Eric.

"That's something I cannot answer," said Adam, looking straight ahead.

"You mean you won't," cried Eric.

"Haven't I always been fair with you?" demanded the older man. "Can't you take my word for it that he is all right, without demanding explanations?"

"No, I've got to know."

"Then, my boy, you'll have to get your information from someone else."

"By heaven, Adam Carr, if he tries to marry my sister, I'll kill him!"

"I wouldn't say that, Eric."

" I mean it. Curse him, I won't have my sister —"

Adam turned on him, with the first touch of coldness the young man had ever known him to reveal.

" Stop right there. Consider well before you condemn any man, or any man's mother." There was a clear and unmistakable meaning in his words. Eric flushed and then turned deathly pale.

" Stop the cab!" he said, hoarse with a sudden rage toward the speaker. " Let me out, I say."

Adam smiled, a trifle wearily, but with a certain wistful gentleness that did not fail to appeal to the hotheaded young traveller. He took out his handkerchief and cleared the moisture from his brow — moisture that might not have been left there by the fine, penetrating drizzle.

" Are you about to forget, Eric, that we are friends?" he asked quietly. " Forgive me for what I said just now. It was the only way to bring you to time, as the saying goes. We'll never allude to it again. Now, if you'll sit there quietly, I'll tell you about Mary. It's quite natural that she should admire John Payson. He's an ideal type of American. He's good looking and he does things. They say that of President Roosevelt: he does things. They don't say he's good looking, but that's of no consequence." He smiled in his queer, mirthless way. " She turned to Jack when Horace turned against him. That was quite natural, too. Mrs. Blagden maintains to this day, with a sort of secret way of impressing her views without actually uttering them in so many words, that young Payson was really at the bottom of the bank robberies, and that I put up the job on her son for reasons of my own. What's more, she believes that Jack knows something of Chetwynd's whereabouts. A mother's hallucination, or something of that sort. Well, when Jack and Mary met each other a year or two ago,— I introduced them at my daddy's gate-house — she was a bit cold toward him. You see, she had always been a lady, right from the day of her birth, and Jack had only been a *man* from the day of his coming into the world. It takes a lady a long time to overcome a prejudice against the kind of a chap she has been brought up to consider nothing but a man.

" I believe your friend, Miss Bright, has never quite come to that way of looking at things. She doesn't know that it is the man in you that she admires; she thinks it is the gentleman. But that's beside the question. I must be getting old, I talk so much.

" In course of time, Mary came to see something she liked in Jack. He is ten years older than she and he's had hard knocks enough to make him seem even older than that to her. He —"

" You introduced him to her? " broke in Eric hotly. " You arranged it, I'll stake my head."

" Well, hardly that," said Adam easily. " It just happened. Fate, I daresay. She wasn't long in finding that he'd made good in New York. Some of his friends happen to be actresses. That was enough to condemn him in Corinth. They don't like actresses there. They like 'em in the phonograph, but not in the flesh. Well, Jack has a lot of fine friends in New York who are not actresses, but who admire these stage women for what they are — bright, clever, true women who fight just as shy of evil as their sisters do in Corinth, but without going to prayer-meeting once a week for instructions.

" Horace Blagden couldn't believe his senses. He stepped in as Mary's guardian and told her to drop Jack and his well-dressed friends. I don't blame him altogether, mind you. He thought he was acting for her best interests. I suppose he has written you about all this. They tell me he isn't as narrow as he used to be. If he could forget that he is Horace Blagden for a little while, he might be a wiser man. I'll say that for him, even though I despise him.

" He figures that Jack is a schemer, that he means to marry Mary, and — above all — that he wants to get hold of her money. Well, a few weeks ago, as you know, she became of age. He wasn't satisfied with her promise to leave her money affairs in his hands, just as you have done, but he must regulate everything else for her. She wouldn't sign an agreement, so he took it to mean that sooner or later she'd let Jack make other investments for her. He put his foot down hard a fortnight ago. Said that Jack was the illegitimate son of someone and not fit to keep company with her. Mary couldn't stand it. She eloped with Jack."

" Eloped! " groaned Eric. " Are they — married? "

" No," said Adam complacently.

" The infernal scoundrel! " raged Eric, beating his clenched fists together. " And you try to defend him! Oh, my poor little Mary! My poor —"

" It wasn't that kind of an elopement," explained Adam. " She asked him to take her to the home of Mrs. Kendrick in New York — a mutual friend, and a very noble woman. He did it, that's all. She's there now, and my father has a letter for you at the gate-house, explaining everything. You needn't worry. She won't come to harm — not at the hands of Jack Payson. He wants to marry her. That ought to satisfy you. Men don't wrong the women they really want to marry. It's not in the game. They wrong the ones they don't want to marry."

"I must see her at once. Where does this Mrs. Kendrick live? Hey, cabby! Pull up a minute. Tell him where to go, Mr. Adam."

The young man was shivering with the ague of dread and excitement.

"We will go to the Holland House, and then you'll take the evening train for Corinth," said Adam dictatorially. Eric's energetic protests met with a calm stolidity on the part of his friend. "Jack Payson will meet you at my father's cottage in the morning, after you have read Mary's letter. It is his place to put the matter squarely before you, as a man should. We talked it over this morning. He says that you may demand satisfaction from him, and he's square enough to meet you face to face before you go to Mary with reproaches."

Nothing would move him.

Eric, in a fever of impatience, took the evening train for Corinth, accompanied by Adam Carr.

"If any harm has come to Mary, I'll kill! Yes, Mr. Adam, I'll kill!" he repeated over and over again.

"I'm not saying Mary did a wise thing in running away like this," admitted Adam. "It has caused a lot of talk,— you might say scandal. You know the kind of women there are in Corinth. They're bound to say nasty things. But she *would* do it. The only decent thing Jack Payson could do was to see her through with it. He loves her. He couldn't do anything else."

Eric shut his jaws with a snap. "She's got me to reckon with," he grated. "She'll come back to Corinth or I'll know the reason why."

"She'll come back if you insist, but I wouldn't insist too vigorously, if I were you," was Adam's sententious advice.

The next morning, after having listened for an hour or more to the bitter declamations of his uncle and aunt, Eric left the breakfast table to redeem his promise to Joan. He had promised to call her up on the telephone the instant he arrived in Corinth. Other distracting events had put this tender obligation out of his thoughts. A servant in the Bright home informed him that Miss Joan was out of town and would not return until the end of the following week. He was annoyed and puzzled by this extraordinary piece of news. Joan, in her last letter, had said she would be fairly hanging over the 'phone, waiting to hear his dear voice.

His appointment with John Payson was for eleven o'clock. Adam Carr had arranged it, apparently without consulting the New Yorker.

Eric had been at once struck by the changes in his uncle and aunt. They were white of hair, grey of face, and more than ordinarily smileless. Signs of deep suffering lay in their eyes. Heavy lines marked the gaunt, ascetic face of his uncle; his shoulders drooped far more than his rigid, upright figure might have suggested. He looked a man of seventy-five, instead of sixty-three or four. Mrs. Blagden's hair was perfectly white. A strange, sad sweetness,— the reflection of far-off girlhood gentleness,— had come into her face. Her voice was soft, and charged with a curiously vibrant note, altogether unfamiliar to Eric, whose strongest recollection was of sharp, incisive tones that bore no relation to love.

She moved with a certain listlessness, and yet there was ever the underlying suggestion of alertness, of eagerness. He observed that she never passed the grim old hall clock without glancing at its face; for an instant her manner suggested the attitude of one listening,— just a flitting impression,— as if she were trying to catch a sound not distinguishable to other ears. Her sombre black dress bore no touch of colour save the ivory cross that hung suspended from her neck at the end of a string of heavy jet beads.

He had told them that he did not hold them responsible for the step Mary had taken, and they seemed grateful. Something in the manner of these uncompromising natures gave him to understand that they had softened, at least toward him; that the steel edges had worn away; that wistful, hungry hearts were being laid bare that he might see them plainly and forget not to touch them gently.

"I shall bring her back, Aunt Rena," he had said.

"She will be welcome, Eric," said his aunt, and he was surprised by the simple appeal that went with the words. "We acted as we thought best. If we were wrong,— well, we cannot always be right, try as we may."

"They tell me that Joan is away from home," he said, on his return from the telephone.

His uncle was standing at the window, looking out over the wet lawn, a gaunt, frail figure, poignant with reserve.

Horace turned. "She's off on a cruise with young Sallonsby and his party."

"Sallonsby? You don't mean the Sallonsbys of Boston?"

"Paul Sallonsby. I think you knew him at Cambridge. He has come into a fortune. His father died a year and a half ago, leaving two millions and over to each of his children. Paul has been seeing a great deal of Joan, I hear. He has taken a party to the West Indies."

"They left last week," added Mrs. Blagden. "His yacht was in the harbour here for two days."

Eric was dazed. He could hardly believe his ears. Joan had not mentioned young Sallonsby in any of her letters, nor had she spoken of a contemplated cruise. It was more than strange that she should go away at the very time he was expected home. A dull pain assailed him. What did it mean? Was it possible — but no! She could not be anything but constant. He could swear by the pure light in her eyes. And yet, she had gone away.

Vaguely dismayed — in addition to the depression that was already upon him,— he wandered up and down the hall, through the dim parlour and sitting-room, torn by many emotions. The prim rooms, so unlike those to which he had become accustomed in Paris and elsewhere, seemed to be narrower, more confined than before he went away. They appeared to shrink in size, even as he stood in them, the walls drawing closer about him, the ceiling coming down as if driven by a great, slow-moving press. An atmosphere of oppressiveness surrounded him. All the brightness seemed to have been swept out of life. Something dead pervaded the house, from top to bottom.

The same damask sofas and chairs stood in their accustomed places in the parlour. The brussels carpet, with the big, well-remembered pattern, lay beneath his feet, as new as the day it was first put down, twenty-five years ago. The old portraits and oil paintings still hung suspended by silken picture cords, relics of an obsolete grandeur. Over by the window which looked out upon the front yard and the street at the bottom of the knoll, stood a chair that somehow was out of place in his memory. It was drawn up close to the side of the window, and faced the light though screened from outer view by the heavy, immaculate lace curtains that always had been there.

Immaculate? He crossed over, struck by an unusual aspect. One of the curtains hung straight and prim, but the other, next to the chair, was slightly crumpled, even soiled along the inner edge.

A careful hand had been drawing it aside for years! Every day someone had sat in that chair, peering between the curtains — looking for someone who never came.

The well-remembered scent of a perfume affected by his aunt in deference to her distant New York incarnation, came faintly to his nostrils as he leaned over the chair. How many times had she drawn that curtain aside to look down into the winding, tree-lined street?

He turned away with a shudder, and left the room, hurrying out upon the drenched lawn, where the leaves of the preceding autumn still lay dank and brown beneath stark and leafless trees to which the breath of spring had not yet come. He stopped at the lower gate to look back at the grey house he had left.

How small and insignificant it was, and how desolate! The Giant's Castle! He had a sudden feeling of pity for it. It represented all that was big in Corinth, and yet how it had shrunk since he had last looked upon it.

And it was still called the Giant's Castle by imaginative small folk, and it was a dreadful place where ogres lived!

"I don't wonder that Mary left it," he said, half aloud, the bleakness of the view wringing the confession from his soul.

He was half an hour ahead of time at Jabez Carr's cottage. The old man, as dry and shrivelled as a butternut "hull," greeted him with great joy and a new garrulousness that proclaimed his eighty odd years in a way pitifully plain. The old man was not long in getting to the subject that pleased him best to discuss: the great religious upheaval in Corinth's First Congregational Church. He had views on the subject, and he vented them with many a joyous cackle. Jabez had not been inside the doors of a church in sixty years, and he had no settled ideas as to religion aside from a vague recognition of the Holy Trinity, yet to have heard him on this wet March morning as he sat close upon the little stove in his cottage you might have thought that the burden of all Christianity rested upon his shoulders.

Eric sat by the tiny window, watching the lane. At last he started up and his eyes narrowed. Adam Carr, had he been present, would have noted the sudden clenching of his hands and the squaring of the jaw.

John Payson was coming through the gate, a strong, well-put-up figure of a man, trimly dressed and brisk.

Ignoring Jabez, who was in the midst of an eloquent appeal to God to witness his absolute lack of prejudice in the Blagden-Presbrey controversy, Midthorne flung open the door and strode out into the open. He wanted to meet his man where it was wide and free.

Payson came on, his eyes expressing recognition, but not the faintest sign of confidence.

Eric stopped short and was staring hard at the face of the new-comer, fascinated by what he saw there. For weeks he had been trying to recall something he had overlooked in John Payson's features. Now the thing he had always missed recognising forced itself upon him with such a positive clearness that he was shocked beyond expression.

The clean-cut, aggressive face of the young man was singularly like that of Adam Carr, with the distinction that it was not so coarsely moulded, and far from sinister. The grey eyes were set far back in the head and the cheek bones were high and broad, as in the case of Adam Carr. The lower part of the face was not so broad nor so resolute, but still there was a singular resemblance to the jaw and the chin of the detective. Payson's countenance was frank and open, full of power and virility, while Adam's was heavy, expressionless, almost sphinx-like in its immobility. The resemblance, startling as it was, ended with the face. The younger man was tall, supple, graceful; Adam was stocky, Samsonian.

Eric had not seen the ex-teller in five or six years, but he was able, in this instant, to call up vague, haunting impressions that had always puzzled him when he met him face to face. He had never known him well. Payson was older than he by half a dozen years.

Observing the peculiar look in Midthorne's eyes, Payson stopped when some six or eight paces away. His own narrowed slightly.

"Am I an object of curiosity to you, Mr. Midthorne?" he asked quietly. Eric started. The tone, the absence of inflection, the very manner of putting the question was so familiar to him that he experienced the actual sensation of awe.

"Yes," he replied levelly; "an object of great curiosity."

"Perhaps animosity."

"Yes, distinctly so."

Payson came forward. "I am sorry for that, Eric.

I hope to overcome that feeling. May I ask: why this aversion?"

Eric surveyed him coldly. "I don't believe it is necessary for me to answer that question."

"Permit me to disagree with you. If I have done anything to deserve your harsh opinion of me, I desire to know what it is and where I stand before taking up the question that means so much to both of us."

"We can settle that, Mr. Payson, without exchanging confidences," said Eric, white to the lips. "You have acted like an infernal scoundrel in enticing my —"

"Pardon me," interrupted the other. "I did not come to insult you nor to be insulted by you. Scoundrel is a hard word. I will not ask you to recall it now, but I'll expect you to do it some day. You —"

"Has Adam Carr told you what I intend to do to you if you do not keep away from my sister?" demanded Eric hotly, ignoring the taunt.

"He has. You intend to kill me, I believe. I think I have some right to inquire why you take that attitude toward a man who has every honourable intention in the world —"

"Honourable! Do you call it honourable to entice a young girl away from the home of her natural protectors, to throw her among fast women and men, to offer her wines, and to — to compromise her?"

"I have done none of these things, Mr. Midthorne, as you will discover when you have taken the trouble to go beyond the accounts given by the natural protectors you mention. This interview promises to be painful. We will cut it short. My object in coming here is to inform you that Mary has promised to be my wife."

"What! Why, you miserable —"

"One moment, please. She is quite as dear to me as she is to you. I did not ask her to leave her home. She went of her own free will. You say that I have placed her among fast women and men. If you choose to judge my friends by the standards of Corinth, they *are* fast. I think, however, you may have seen enough of the world to know that a snail would be swift in Corinth. My friends are now her friends. They will be yours, too, I hope, Mr. Midthorne, and you will have reason to be proud of them — just as I am. If she has ever tasted wine in her life, I am not aware of the fact. If her association with me has compromised her, I am unable to define what you may be pleased to call 'honourable intentions.' I owe you certain explanations, that is all. But, by the Lord Harry, sir, I owe you no apologies, either for myself or Mary. My record is clean, my conscience clear. There is no more for me to say. I persuaded your sister to grant me the privilege of seeing you first, Mr. Midthorne. Mr. Carr has already assured me of your antipathy. You came here to meet me. I thank you. My duty was plain. Your first reproaches should fall on me, not on her. I did not expect, however, to be called an infernal scoundrel. It is rather unusual, isn't it?"

Eric had been staring at him intently through this long, level speech. It was being borne in upon him, much against his will, that Payson was doing the honourable thing, and that he had put himself in a most unenviable position by forgetting his own dignity.

"I spoke in heat," he said, but somewhat doggedly. "I can only think of Mary as a — well, as a child. She knows nothing of men."

"Nor do you, I fear," said Payson coolly.

"What do you mean?"

"A man isn't likely to stand being called a scoundrel with impunity."

"Is that a threat?"

"I leave it to you. Suppose I were to call you an infernal scoundrel, out of a clear sky, so to speak. Would you accept it amiably?"

Eric stiffened. The blood of his father responded nobly.

"I am prepared, sir, to give you satisfaction."

For the first time Payson smiled. "Mary said that you would most likely challenge me."

Eric flushed. "I give you to understand, sir, that this is not child's play. You cannot treat it as a joke. It is —"

"But I graciously promised her that I would overlook all the affronts of this first interview. I knew just how you would be feeling," said Payson good humouredly.

Midthorne turned away, biting his lips to hold back the rush of angry words.

"You will have to admit, Eric, that I have done the decent —"

"Don't call me Eric! And don't use the word 'decent,'" snapped Eric. "It's so damned middle-class. It shows where you belong."

Payson's cheek burned. "That, at least, was uncalled for, Mr. Midthorne. I am a plain man, and a decent one, even though it jars on you. But we are wasting words. I came to ask for your sister's hand. Am I to understand that you mean to oppose me?"

"Most assuredly. I forbid her to even think of it."

Payson smiled. "I'm afraid you can't control her thoughts. She has outgrown you, Mr. Midthorne. You seem to forget that she is a woman. I have no sister, but I believe I can in a measure appreciate the shock you have experienced in suddenly learning that *your* sister is no longer a child in pinafores, but a grown woman, with a woman's heart and body and a woman's capacity to love a man because he is a man. She adores you, she will be guided by what you advise, but —" He stopped and shook his head slowly.

"She will drop you like a hot poker, Payson, when I've told her a few things I know," said Eric, feeling that he was getting very much the worst of it and growing vindictive in consequence.

"Would you mind telling these things to me?" demanded Payson, a hard glitter in his eyes.

"They're between Mary and me, that's all I've got to say."

"Do you think you are meeting me fairly?"

"It doesn't in the least matter."

"Very well. The interview is at an end. I may as well tell you, however, that I intend to marry your sister."

"We'll see about that," grated Eric.

Payson bowed very stiffly and turned to walk away. After taking a few steps, he whirled impulsively, a pleading look in his eyes. His voice rang with an honest appeal to the other's fairness.

"See here, Eric, can't we be friends? What have I done that you should treat me in this manner? I don't want to go back to Mary with the sting of her brother's hatred hurting me, knowing that I've got to go on loving her while —"

"In the first place," interrupted Eric, "you want to get your hands on her little fortune. You —"

"Stop right there! I wish to serve notice on you and your Uncle Horace that when I become Mary's husband it will devolve upon me to look after all of her affairs. If you think I'm the sort of man who will consent to the espionage of a — well, I won't say it. He's your uncle. But take this from me: I'll handle Mary's property."

"And sink every dollar of it in some wild-cat speculation of yours. I know the kind," sneered Eric.

"I am not a speculator," said Payson quietly.

"We'll pass that point. I'm going to put a very blunt question to you. Who was your father?"

Payson's face went very white. A full minute passed before his lips parted in reply to this unexpected question.

"My father was not a blue-stocking, Mr. Midthorne, if that's what you're trying to get at. Am I to understand that you object to me because I happen to have been born to a somewhat less exalted state than your own?"

"No. Not just that," said Eric meaningly. "Who is your father?"

The one small word was like a blow in the face. "Is," he said,— not "was."

"Why,— why, what do you mean?" stammered Payson, the blood rushing to his cheeks. "My father is dead. I can't even remember him. You — you think he is alive? That he is — Good Lord, you don't suspect that he is a criminal, a fugitive, or something of that sort!"

"He died before you can remember?" cried Eric, his eyes gleaming.

"Yes. He was a sailing-master. He took a boat out of this port for years. One night he was lost in a gale. His body never came ashore. He's lying out there in the Atlantic somewhere, with all the others who are buried in that vast grave. For you know, Mr. Midthorne, that the Atlantic is a graveyard."

Eric was suddenly conscious of a disconcerting directness in the other man's words. It seemed to him that there was a significant, even mocking gleam in the greyish eyes.

A chill crept swiftly into his blood. He felt the icy moisture starting from every pore in his body. Was it possible that Payson knew? Was he so close to Adam Carr that the great secret had been given into his keeping,— and for what sinister purpose? To be used as a threat, as a club?

With an almost visible effort, he regained control of his wavering fortitude. There was the chance, he argued inwardly, that Payson's remark had no sinister meaning. He would not be so easily caught.

"Are you quite sure your father is lying at the bottom of the Atlantic?" he asked, after the briefest hesitation.

Payson scowled. "See here, Midthorne, I don't like your manner. What are you driving at? My father, Captain Henry Payson, went down with his schooner, the *Lanigan*. Three of the crew were picked up alive. Two of them are inmates to-day of the Seaman's Home. There is no mistake. He was an honest man, and a God-fearing one. He was not a gentleman, according to your lights, I daresay, but he must have been a good man, for my mother has prayed that I might grow up to be like him." He came a step nearer. "What have you heard? Has anyone told you that he did not go down with the *Lanigan?* Has anyone dared to say that he took that way of deserting my mother and me?"

"How old were you when the ship went down?" demanded Eric, ignoring the questions.

"What has that to do with it?"

"Will you answer the question or not?"

"Certainly. I was not more than six months old, they tell me. My mother has told me the story a hundred times over — all about the black night and the savage storm in the April of that year. Adam Carr has told me of my father. He was his closest friend. He always stayed at our house when he was in Corinth between voyages. I've known him always. He can tell you that my father was an honest man and that he did go down with the *Lanigan*. I am not ashamed of my father. By heaven, I hope I am like him. He was a *man!*"

There could be no doubt as to his sincerity. If there was a mystery in connexion with his origin, he was totally ignorant of the fact. It was plain to Eric that the secret mumblings of gossiping townspeople had never reached his ears; it was equally plain that Payson had never noted the resemblance of himself to Adam Carr.

In spite of himself, Eric felt a sudden, sharp pity for this tall, good-looking chap.

"I have the right to inquire, you'll admit that, Payson," he said, less arbitrarily.

"Perhaps you're right," said the other, biting his lip as he stared at the ground through narrowed lids. "Mary, God bless her, would have taken me as I am, without a single question. It's just as well that there is someone to ask questions for her. Good morning, Mr. Midthorne."

Eric watched him until his strong, erect figure disappeared at a bend in the lane. Vaguely conscious that he had not come off with flying colours in this fruitless interview, he jammed his hands into his pockets and, with lowered chin, turned to re-enter the cottage.

There was a new kind of terror tugging at his heart. To what end was Adam Carr carrying his mysterious game?

A raucous, indistinct but startlingly familiar laugh came to his ears. He stopped in his tracks as if turned to stone. For years he had been waiting for a repetition of that never-to-be-forgotten sound. Somehow he knew it would come again. He knew that it would avail him not to look for visible signs of him who laughed. The sound was of the air itself; it enveloped him; he could reach out his hand and touch the laugh itself! He was breathing that ghastly sound, he was inhaling it!

His knees shook. He could feel the hair on his head rise, as if responding to the freezing current that raced through him. His glaring eyes searched among the leafless branches of the trees.

Again came the low laugh, this time apparently from the interior of the cottage. With a cry, he sprang to the door and threw it open, stopping on the threshold to peer into the dim interior of the old man's home.

In a rocking chair, back in the darkest corner of the room, sat a long, shadowy figure. A groan broke in the young man's dry throat. It was a familiar figure. He had seen it in his dreams.

As he fell back against the door-jamb, the figure arose from the chair. It seemed to shrink in size as he glared at it. It moved toward him.

"Good morning, Eric," said Adam Carr, emerging into the light that came through the open doorway.

"Good God!" broke from Eric's stiffened lips. He staggered to a chair and dropped heavily into it.

"Have you seen a ghost?" asked Adam, stopping short to stare at his young friend.

"When — when did you come in here?" demanded Eric hoarsely.

"I spent the night here. I overslept," said the other, his short, heavy frame stretching as if arousing itself from the lethargy of sleep. "Father's out in the kitchen making a pot of coffee for me."

"What were you laughing at a moment ago?" asked Eric, passing his hand across his moist forehead.

"Oh," said Adam Carr, "you heard me, did you? I was laughing at Jack. You've no idea how stiff and ramroddy he looked stalking down the lane. You must have said something that hurt."

CHAPTER XV

THE PRODIGAL SISTER RETURNS

Eric journeyed to New York by the six o'clock express that evening, in a fever of anxiety not unmixed with despair. He had had a long afternoon in which to think over the situation. The fear had taken possession of him that Mary would not be as tractable as he had fondly hoped. He found himself, unwillingly, it is true, considering the manly charm, the attractive masculinity of John Payson. It was not difficult, now that he was able to picture Mary as something more than the slim, brown-eyed girl he had condemned, in his brotherly ignorance, to a state of eternal immaturity,—it was not difficult, I repeat, for him to understand how she might have fallen in love with the fellow. It was hard to believe, of course, that she was a woman and a woman with a mind of her own. She had always been a little girl to him. Somehow he had felt that she always would be. There was a distinct shock at the awakening. Why, she was twenty-one! His little sister was twenty-one!

Joan Bright was nearing twenty-three, and he had thought of her as a woman for five years or more. She had been his sweetheart — his real sweetheart for ages, it seemed to him. She had known what it was to love and be loved since the days when her frocks came down to her shoe-tops. And she had known, instinctively, from the first, how to meet his love, his passion halfway. It was the woman in her, just as it had been the man in him. Then, why not Mary?

But Jack Payson! Why had Fate led him across his sister's path? Why should he have been the one?

Out of all this, however, grew the sober reflection that he had not discredited Payson until his uncle's letter apprised him of the fact that he was interested in Mary. In fact, he had looked upon the ex-teller as a much abused hero in whose footsteps it were a credit and an honour to tread. Secretly, with all Corinth, in those other days, he had rejoiced in the vindication of Jack Payson.

But that was before his uncle's vague indictment had been sustained by personal observation. With his own eyes he had discovered the bar-sinister. The man was marked. He could not change his spots. There was no question in Eric's mind as to the real truth. He had been born in sin and Adam Carr was father to him.

No small amount of bitterness was added to his cup before he left Corinth. His uncle, with more cruelty than he intended, had compared Eric in his present position to himself under similar conditions many years before.

"It is working around in a circle, Eric," he said, while they were discussing the best means of inducing Mary to return to the house on the hill. "You stand just where I did twenty-six years ago. The situation is identical. Then it was I who suffered the loss of a sister, now it is you. Mary will have her way, just as her mother did before her. She will not be turned back. If I failed in my day, what chance have you in yours? Ah, my boy, we *are* Blagdens, you and I. Time is proving us to be alike in every respect, even to our heartaches and disappointments."

On the other hand, Adam Carr, down in the gatekeeper's cottage, had grimly said, in reply to the young man's bitter lament: "You can't regulate the heartbeats of a young woman, Eric. They either beat for you or against you, and they'll beat in spite of you. That's why men sometimes have such a hard time getting rid of women they're tired of. Can you honestly blame your sister for falling in love with Jack? Now, take your Aunt Rena's case. She had brothers, a couple of 'em. Fine chaps and good sportsmen. What do you suppose they said when they heard she was going to marry a narrow-minded Miss Nancy like Horace Blagden? Why, they simply roared like a couple of wounded lions. But did it do them any good? No, sir. She had set her heart on marrying him, and that settled it. I've often wondered what kind of a woman she might have been if she'd married one of those scamps of New Yorkers your uncle holds so cheaply. She might have been hob-nobbing with the Astors and Vanderbilts at this very minute. But she was bound to have Horace. No, my boy, there's no accounting for taste when a woman's heart is concerned, especially if it's set."

Payson went to New York on the train with Eric, but they saw nothing of each other after a single, unfriendly glance at the Corinth depot.

The next morning Eric presented himself at Mrs. Kendrick's. He knew the lady by reputation, as one knows of people whose names are to be seen in the society columns of the great newspapers and periodicals. He could not help wondering how Jack Payson, a sailing-master's son, came to know the rather exclusive Mrs. Kendrick.

Mary's first words, after their mutual embraces and her own hysteric sniffles of joy, were these:

"Now, Eric, you are not to scold me. I can't bear it."

Whereupon she proceeded to cry very heartily, to his sad undoing.

To his intense amazement — you might say concern — he discovered her to be a fully developed woman, modish to the tips of her toes, and very far removed from the shy, dependent little sister he had known all his life. She was convincingly attractive. He had never thought of her as anything but familiarly pretty. Somehow the very feel of her was different. Instead of the soft, pliant, almost limp feel of an unformed body, there was the firm, tense resistance of a mature woman. The wistful, inquisitive gleam was gone from her eyes; the tender mobility of her lips, the girlish uplift of the chin, the breeze-torn look of the dark hair — all these were gone, for she was a woman,— his little Mary was a woman. She seemed to have turned into one while his back was turned. And stranger still, though immensely gratifying to him, she was like the women he had seen abroad or in New York, the kind he admired: she was smartly gowned, trimly made, with a manner,— a real manner. There was nothing about her to even faintly suggest Corinth.

While he stood off, unbelieving, to admire her, his mind took a sharp leap through space to the deck of a yacht that cruised the Southern seas. Was Joan, too, like this? Had she out-grown his vision so completely? If the transformation in Joan was as pronounced — But, ah! She was off in the Southern seas. That was something else to think about.

The upshot of his visit was that Mary went to Corinth with him that very afternoon. At the end of the long and trying scene, she consented to return with him on condition that she was not to go back to the home of her uncle. She would never agree to that. He would have to take the Verner Cottage, which was for rent. She would keep house for him. They were of age, she argued stubbornly, and independent. They could afford to have a place of their own and — live as they wanted to live, not as Uncle Horace ordained. No amount of persuasion on his part could alter the decision. After all, it was not hard for him to appreciate her point of view. He rather favoured the plan himself. The house on the hill was a dismal place in itself, to say nothing of the conditions which were bound to make it even more unpleasant for both of them.

His chief reason for wanting her to go back to the Blagdens was the effect that such an act would have on the townspeople. It would re-establish her at once, if such a thing were necessary. He had no means of knowing how much of the truth Corinth possessed, or how little of it. There was the forlorn hope, of course, that no questions had been asked, and that her visit to Mrs. Kendrick had been accepted as a perfectly natural arrangement. Still, if there was speculation or rumour he was eager to have it nipped in the bud.

But she objected to even a temporary truce. She would not put her foot inside the Blagden doors. Moreover, she would not go back to Corinth without consulting John Payson's wishes in the matter. This was a sore blow to Eric.

Payson, when she called him up at his office over the telephone, at once advised her to accompany her brother, and to be guided by him in every particular. Mrs. Kendrick, who impressed Eric as a most admirable woman, explained her own position to his complete satisfaction, and urged the girl to do the obviously sensible thing.

On the way to the station in the cab Mary said to Eric, almost defiantly: "This doesn't mean, Errie, that I am giving up Jack. You understand that, don't you?"

He looked straight ahead, his jaw stiffening. "There's time enough for all that, Mary."

Her delicate face seemed to take on a certain hardness. "I suppose Uncle Horace told you I'd go to the devil, just as mother did, and that's what you're afraid of. Oh, don't look so horrified, Errie. It's just between you and me. He didn't hesitate to say it to me, only he said dogs instead of devil. You wouldn't have endured it, either. We're not helpless children any longer."

"Mary, we must never talk about — about what happened when we were babies. I don't know how much of the story is true, but — well, let's drop the subject."

"But are you afraid I'll do just what old Presbrey and the rest of them prophesied I'd do?" she persisted.

"No, I'm not, dear. You are as good as gold," he cried eagerly.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "If you'll trust me, Errie, I'll trust you," she said enigmatically. She put her hand in his and said no more.

. . . .

They had lived in the Verner cottage for more than a week before Eric began to observe the peculiar interest people were taking in their little home. Women, in passing, were prone to direct furtive glances toward their doorway and windows, glances that more often than not became rather penetrating. Aside from the natural interest people would be expected to take in the doings of Horace Blagden's wards, there were unmistakable evidences of sharp curiosity. It finally dawned on him that passers-by were not interested in the Midthornes jointly, but in Mary alone. Women stared at the curtained windows, and then, before reaching the obstructing hedge, invariably turned to speak to each other in a way that left no room for speculation as to the significance of their comments.

The town was beginning to discuss Mary. That was the sum and substance of it.

In great distress, Eric went to his uncle. Neither of the Blagdens had been near the little home in Grove Street. Their aloofness alone was sufficient to create comment, and comment in a place like Corinth is usually of an unfavourable character.

Horace listened to the young man's bitter arraignment of fate and took counsel with him.

"Bring Mary to church next Sunday morning," he said in conclusion. "Sit in your old places in our pew. Your aunt and I will be there as usual. If Mary cares to have us do so, we will stop for you on the way over. If it is pleasant we shall walk. I suggest, however, that you consult Mary before undertaking to carry out this plan, Eric. The situation might easily become awkward for all of us."

"Thank you, Uncle Horace," said Eric, greatly relieved. "I'll take it up with Mary."

Horace cleared his throat. "I'm sorry she refuses to come to our home. It should be her home and yours. But if she won't, she won't. Your aunt and I have talked the matter over. If you'd like us to do so, we will drop in occasionally to see you at the cottage. Perhaps, it would be rather helpful if we were to do so."

"It's just the thing," cried Eric. "It's good of you to excuse Mary's attitude, Uncle Horace. She'll come to her senses in a little while, I'm sure. You will be most heartily welcome at —"

Horace pursed his lips as he shook his head slowly. "You'd better ask Mary first, my boy. Then let me know if we will be welcome."

Mary was surprisingly docile about it. She was no fool. She sensed the thing that was in the air.

"All right, Errie. I'll do what you think best. Mrs. Paulding cut me to-day in the street. That shows how the wind blows. You poor boy! I *am* sorry on your account."

"I can't bear the thought of —" he began, but instantly checked the words. He came near to saying something that would have hurt her.

She waited for a moment, her lips parted as if prepared to cry out against the expected pain. Then they trembled with the wayward little smile that was her greatest charm.

"Good old Errie! You came near to saying something horrid, didn't you?" She put her hands on his shoulders, facing him. "Isn't this ever so much nicer, living here as we do? You know it is. I think —"

"It's great, Mary," he cried warmly.

"Let them gossip," she said cheerfully, although there was a darker glow in her eyes. "It won't make any difference after I'm married and out of reach of them. It's just because I'm *not* married that they're talking, and looking at my back after I've passed, and all that sort of thing. But —"

He clasped her hands in his and bent over her fiercely. "You can't marry Jack Payson, Mary," he cried. "I can't permit it. There is a reason, a compelling reason. Why — why, I'd kill him before I'd see —"

"Now, Errie!" she cried, snatching her hands away. "Don't say anything you'll regret. I won't listen to you."

"Why, he's — he's a — No, I won't say it!" he groaned.

"A thief? I'll say it for you. He isn't one, and you know it, but even if he were, what cause have we for boasting?"

"Good heaven, Mary!"

"Well, let's change the subject," she said sharply. "You'd better hurry on or you'll miss your appointment with Judge Bright. Have you sent the plans to him?"

He took two or three turns up and down the room, pulling himself together.

"No," he said, breathing deeply. "The understanding was that I was to show them to Joan first of all. She's not here. See here, Mary, how do things stand with you and Joan?"

"I don't know, Errie. I wish I did. We had a tiff a couple of months ago. She said something horrid about John Payson and I replied in a way she did not like. I said he was a good deal more of a man than that Sallonsby chap and that he'd still be a man when her fine gentleman was pegging around with locomotor ataxia or something — Why, Errie! What is the matter?"

He was staring at her, dismay in his face.

"Paul Sallonsby? You mean she's —"

"She's mad about him. They —" The words died on her lips. He had turned very white. The truth was revealed to her. Impulsively she flew to his side.

"Oh, Errie! I didn't know it was like that. You care for her — in that way? Oh, Errie! I'm *so* sorry! I — I thought it was only a boy and girl affair."

He held her, sobbing, in his arms. His bloodless lips were working, but not in the effort to speak. . . . Something had been shattered.

A little later he left the house and made his way across to Judge Bright's home. All zest in the building project was gone. He had no heart in the long-cherished enterprise. It was now a cold, dull business transaction, not a labour of love.

He could not believe it of Joan. Allowing for the distance that separated them, there had been ample time for a letter to have reached him from the West Indies. The fact that she had left no word for him in Corinth, not so much as a line, was even more convincing to his unwilling mind. She *had* found someone else to take his place. The fond dream was over. He was awake after the long, sweet sleep of security,— awake to find that while he slept she had slipped away from him never to return. And yet he could not believe it of her.

His fears were somewhat lessened by the warmth of Judge Bright's greeting. The fine old Justice was frankly glad to see him. There could be no doubt as to the genuineness of his affection, nor was his enthusiasm over the prospects of his young friend a whit diminished by the years that had fallen upon both of them.

"I wish Joan could see you at this moment, Eric," he said, as he wrung the tall, handsome fellow's hand. "She has often wondered what the two years would do for you. Upon my soul, you are the living image of your father when he was twenty-five,— and he was a man one looked at twice, let me say to you. It does my heart good to see you, my boy. And it would do yours good to see my Joan." His eyes glowed with joy and pride. "Ah, my boy, she is wonderful."

Eric flushed. "I am sorry she is not at home, Judge Bright. I — I had looked forward to seeing her, you may be sure."

The Justice poked him with his thumb. "I believe there was a boy and girl attachment, wasn't there?"

"I am afraid it was no more than that," said Eric soberly.

Judge Bright gave him a keen glance. "I'll not tell her that you put it in just those words," he said, and Eric wondered not a little.

Later on, they fell to discussing the plans for the new house. Some of Eric's enthusiasm returned.

"Of course, we can't do anything until she returns from this pleasure cruise," said the Judge. "She'd never forgive me if I took a step without consulting her. You've no idea how completely she has me under her thumb."

"When do you expect her to return?" asked Eric.

"It's hard to say. They were to start north this week, coming direct to Boston, but it seems that new plans have been made. I had word yesterday that they are going to Vera Cruz and New Orleans and a number of places along the gulf, despite the approach of hot weather in those parts. It now appears that the yacht won't start homeward short of four or five weeks. We'll have to sit back and wait for her, Eric, that's all."

Eric departed without having exposed his true feelings to the father of the girl he loved. His pride was beginning to assert itself. A dull red seemed to have come into his cheek to stay.

"Will you be so kind as to let me know when Joan returns, Judge Bright?"

"I fancy you'll know it quite as soon as I do," said the girl's father, with a smile.

"That's not likely, sir," said Eric calmly.

He walked rapidly in the direction of the public square. Not that business called him there, but because he wanted to be where humanity was thickest in Corinth. He wanted to imagine himself in Paris! The ludicrousness of the thing did not occur to him. He only knew that he hungered for something gay, and bright, and whirling. The public square in Corinth was the nearest approach to all that.

At the corner of the square he stopped suddenly and looked about him as if aroused from a daze. A short, bitter laugh broke from his lips.

"Good heaven!" he muttered, staring across the deserted common. "As dead as Carthagenia itself. Why should I stay here? What is there for me? By George, I'll get out before I'm a week older. Mary's right. What a fool I am to think of wasting even a day in this place. I'll tell Judge Bright I can't take on the house for him. It's out of the —"

A hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned to face his uncle.

"A bad habit, Eric, talking aloud," said the gaunt old man.

"I've just come to a decision, Uncle," said Eric, a trace of excitement in his voice.

"I have an idea what it is, my boy. You were looking at the new Court-house. That tells the tale. It is a handsome building."

"No, no! It isn't that, Uncle Horace. I wasn't thinking of the Court-house," cried Eric hastily.

"Nevertheless, there must be a bitterness in your heart as you look at it. You are its creator, and yet the fact is known only to you and me. You have decided to tell the truth about the — er, ahem! — the design."

Horace was looking straight past his nephew's head. The young man noted the deepening of the lines about his lips.

He cried out in protest. "I have not given it a thought, Uncle Horace. That's all past. I don't care — not now."

Horace looked into his eyes. "It's a terrible lie I've been living all these years, Eric. Sometimes I feel —" The sentence died on his lips. A slight shiver went over his thin figure. His face hardened and the warm light in his eyes gave way to a hard glitter. "There he is, over there,— under the Massasoit awning." The utter irrelevance of the remark had a curious effect on Eric. He was at that instant thinking of Chetwynd Blagden.

"What!" he gasped, feeling himself turn pale.

He turned to follow the direction of his uncle's gaze, half-expecting to see the huge figure of his cousin.

Adam Carr was standing near the entrance to the hotel, boldly detached, but looking in the opposite direction.

"I had another letter from him to-day," said Horace, speaking as if to himself. "Will he never bring this chase to —" He caught himself up with a visible effort, and closed his lips as if they were never to be parted again.

"What did he say in that letter, Uncle Horace? I demand an answer," cried Eric, his soul sick.

"Nothing that I can speak of to you or anyone else," said his uncle harshly. "But —" and here his face seemed to turn positively livid —" damn him, I will not let him see, I will never let him know!"

Then, his manner changing like a flash, he apologised for the single blasphemous word, and, thrusting his arm through Eric's, deliberately led him down the street toward Adam Carr. They passed within arm's-reach of the man, whose back was still toward them.

"Good morning, Adam," said Mr. Blagden as they passed.

Adam still gazed into the cigarist's window.

"Good morning, Horace," said he briskly. That was all. They had been passing the time of day in this manner, on widely separated occasions, for years.

Out of hearing, Horace lifted his arm and pointed to a row of small, unsightly buildings on the north side of the square.

"I own that row of buildings, Eric," he said, as if there was nothing else in his tired, harassed brain but business affairs. "They are an eye-sore, aren't they? Well, I'm deeding that entire block to the city of Corinth. What is more, sir, in the very centre of the block, after we've demolished those unsightly structures, there is to be erected the handsomest public library in the state, designed by the most able architect I can think of, and built under his direction. It is to be called the Blagden Library, and it is to be designed by Eric Midthorne, and it is to cost $400,000. I am giving it to Corinth. I want you to build something for me, Eric, that I can be proud of to the end of my days."

Eric stared. "Uncle Horace, are you cra — I mean, are you in earnest? Do you mean —"

"By the way," interrupted his uncle calmly, "I'd like you to keep it a secret for a day or two. The deeds are being prepared by Mr. Graves. To-morrow, perhaps, I'll give it to the *Courier*. I believe newspaper men would call it a scoop, or a beat, which is it? At any rate, we'll supply the paper with editorial food for a month or more, eh? Blagden breakfast food, eh?"

He clapped the bewildered Midthorne on the back and laughed his driest cackle. He was the same old Horace, after all,— the same old egoist.

"I can't believe it," murmured Eric, forgetting his own troubles in the face of this stupendous philanthropy that was to hang over the heads of the Corinthians till the crack of doom.

"You'll see, my boy, you'll see," said his uncle. "Come over this evening and we'll discuss the plans. I have an idea or two myself, and so has your aunt. You may be interested to know that I purpose making Presbrey the librarian in charge."

Again Eric stared. "Why, I thought —"

"I daresay he'll try to decline the honour at first," said Horace blandly, "but we shan't accept no from any man so far as this undertaking is concerned. Oh, by the way, will Mary come to church on Sunday?"

"Yes," said Eric. "Are you sure you want me to undertake a job as huge as —"

"No one else will be considered," said Horace with finality.

They had come to the stairway leading up to the editorial rooms of the Corinth *Courier*. With a grave bow to Eric, Mr. Blagden turned to mount them, first glancing up at the window from which the publisher was peering.

"He thinks I'm coming for the rent," said Horace. "Good day, Eric."

In a maze of mingled wonder and distress, Eric made his way homeward. He was filled with wonder over his uncle's amazing act of generosity, distressed over the new complication that was about to be forced upon him. Out of the maze came a sharp, cruel revelation of Horace Blagden's true motive in giving this great edifice to the City of Corinth. It was not for the sake of Corinth that he was doing it, nor for the perpetuation of the name of Blagden alone, but as a penance to his own disturbed conscience.

It was his way of measuring expiation.

But how utterly impossible it would be for Eric to accept this tribute! His heart was full. He understood his uncle, and he pitied him. The great man of Corinth was striving to right a wrong that now seemed trivial to the young man. Compensation: that was all it meant to Horace Blagden — a splendid recompense. He could think of no other way to pay so handsomely as this. The world would never know the true meaning of the gift to Corinth, yet he would be square with it. There was something truly pathetic in his method: pathetic because his own self-glorification was a secondary condition despite all outward appearances.

As Eric entered his own little dooryard, the passive resolution that had been gently tugging at his conscience for years leaped into violent protest against further suppression. The time had come when he could no longer maintain silence. The truth would have to be told.

He could no longer watch the suffering of those silent, harassed parents. He could not accept favours from them, knowing all that he knew. He would have to tell.

First of all, he must have it out with Adam Carr. With this thought in mind he was about to retrace his steps toward the square in quest of the detective, when

Mary's voice called to him from the window of their cottage.

He hesitated. The voice of his sister had a strange effect on his new-made resolve. What would all this mean to her? Suppose that Adam Carr turned against him; suppose that his friend denied him in order to protect himself from the wrath of Horace Blagden?

These thoughts were racing through his brain when Mary came out upon the doorstep and called to him:

"Eric, don't go away. Mr. Carr is waiting here to see you. He has heard that Chetwynd is in Rio Janeiro and —"

With a mad cry, Eric dashed up the walk, sweeping her aside as he crossed the porch. The next instant, he stood in the little sitting-room, facing Adam Carr with blazing eyes and quivering lips.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STONE WALL

"It's got to stop! It's got to stop!" he almost shrieked, shaking his clenched fist at the man in the chair.

Adam Carr did not arise, but appeared to shrink deeper into the rocking-chair, as if in actual retreat before the peril in Eric's eyes.

Mary looked on amazed, bewildered. "Eric!" she cried, but he did not hear her.

"Do you hear me, Adam Carr?" he shouted. "It's absolutely devilish. I've got a heart if you haven't. I don't care what happens to me, I'm going to put an end to it. Great heaven, man, can't you see what they're suffering? Haven't you had your fill? Do you mean to keep on up to the day they die? Well, by heaven, you shan't! Do you hear me? You shan't!"

Adam's scowl would have checked a less excited, less distraught speaker. He leaned forward in the chair, his big hands gripping the arms.

"It's only been for six years," he said, as much to himself as to Eric. Apparently he, too, was forgetting the presence of Mary. In the next breath he remembered her. "You'd better hold your tongue, Eric. Mary's here. We can go outside and —"

"No, we'll stay right here. We'll have it out, here and now. I mean to tell Uncle Horace the truth."

"You will do nothing of the kind," snapped Adam Carr, arising.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of the consequences," cried Eric savagely. "I'll pay the price, whatever it is. I can't go on, that's all. Good heaven, do you think I can see you calmly driving nails into their coffins as you —"

"Stop just a minute," said Adam sharply. "Think what you are saying. Are you losing your mind? Leave all this to me, Eric, I beg of you. I am your friend, I —"

"But I am their flesh and blood. My friend, are you? No! Adam Carr, you are my master. You own me, body and soul. Oh, don't misunderstand me. I am not ungrateful. You have helped me. I shan't forget all you did for me six years ago. But I didn't realise what you were going to make of it. You tricked me into —"

"Wait!" cried Adam, plainly distressed. "Don't say that, Eric. I'll admit I took advantage of — of everything — but I did not trick you. It was a fair game. I've kept my lips sealed. I've stood back of you in —"

Eric thrust his face close to the other's. "Do you mean to tell me that Jack Payson hasn't had the whole story from you? Answer me that question. You can't deny it."

Adam fell back a step, genuine astonishment in his face.

"No! Why do you ask? What has he said to lead you to believe — Nonsense! He *doesn't* know it. It's impossible. Eric, there isn't a soul on this earth that knows the truth, except you and I."

"Jack knows,— I'm sure he knows," cried Eric hotly. "And how could he know, except through you? I know what he is to you. But even at that, it was a blamed scurvy thing to do."

The look in Adam's eyes put a sudden check on the ruthless words that were rushing to his lips. The man's face had turned a ghastly blue. He glared for an instant into the fierce eyes opposite, and then slowly drew back, reaching out with his hand for the support of a chair. The hue of apoplexy had covered his face. Eric had never seen a man who looked like this. He was filled with a sudden consternation. Was the man about to die?

"Look out, Mr. Adam!" he cried out. "Here! Sit down! I — I take it all back. I shouldn't have said that. I'm half-crazy.— I'm out of my senses."

Adam waved him off. The purplish hue receded and left his face almost sallow.

"You mean that you take back what you said about — about what?" he demanded.

"About your having told him, of course."

"Ah, I see," said Adam, fixing Eric with eyes in which lay the light of humble appeal. "You don't take back the other."

Eric's gaze wavered. "That's neither here nor there. We won't discuss it, if you please."

"Just as *you* please, Eric," said Adam slowly. Then with a positive snarl in his tones: "He doesn't know. Get that out of your head. No one knows. No one need know. Let me finish. I'll put an end to the whole game if you insist. Give me a week,— no, a month. I'm getting sick of the thing myself. The pleasure's all gone out of it. I'm not altogether heartless; I can even feel sorry for Horace. But we've got to use judgment, discretion. I can't go to him to-day with my lie about Chetwynd's death in some foreign land,— or sea. It will have to be worked up slowly, deliberately.

I've got the thing fixed in my mind. I shall tell him that the boy was killed in the South American revolution now in progress in —"

"No, no!" cried Eric, pounding the mantelpiece with his clenched hand. "I'm going to make a clean breast of it. I'm going to purge my soul of all that curses it. No more trickery, no more lying, no more subterfuge, Mr. Adam. I'm not ungrateful for what you've done for me, God knows I'm not. I can only curse myself for letting it go on so long. I've been a dog, a coward, a — a demon. That's it: a demon. But I can't go on with it. I just can't!"

Adam laid a hand on his shoulder. "You'd better be guided by me, my boy," he said kindly. "I am your friend, and I am in full possession of my wits. Which is more than you can say. Let it go as I have planned. There's no harm in that. I'll go to Horace in a few days and put his mind at rest forever. I will produce positive proof that Chetwynd is dead and —"

A sharp cry broke from Mary's lips. The two men were again conscious of her presence in the room. She was standing near the window with her back to the light, her hands clasped over her breast.

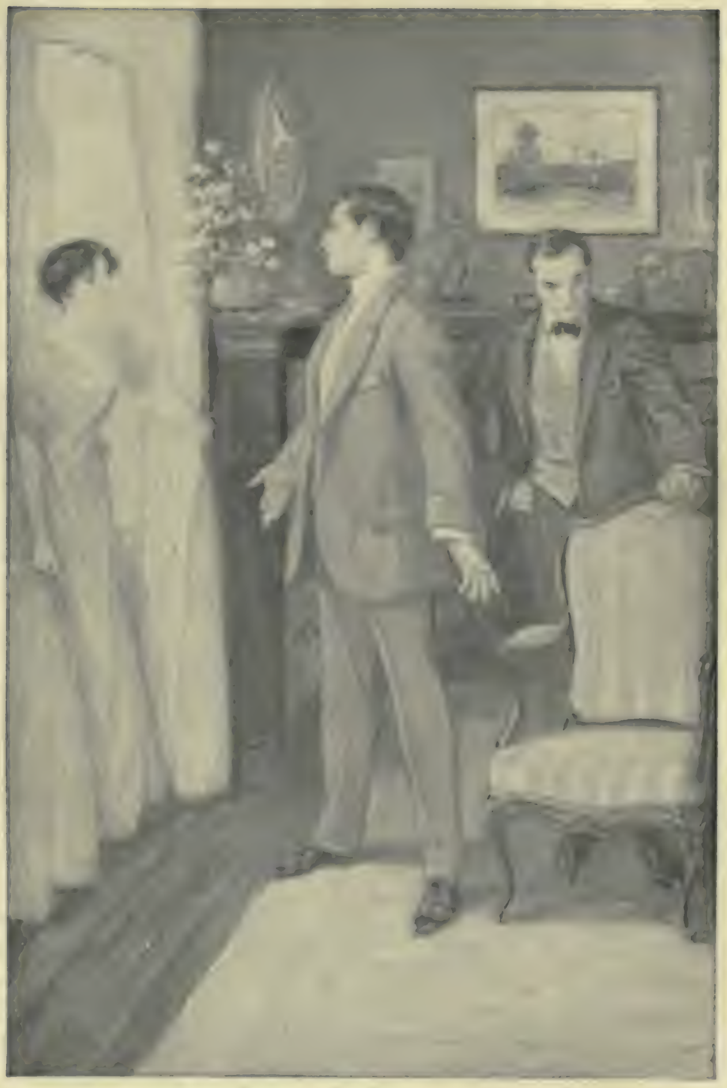
"Eric! What is he saying?" she cried in a shrill, unnatural voice.

Her brother hesitated and then sprang to her side.

"I don't know how to tell you, Mary dear. It's such a horrible — Yes! I'll get it over with. I'll begin with you, Mary. Do you remember the night you dreamed that Chetwynd —"

"For heaven's sake, boy," groaned Adam, "stop and think before you do this."

"No! It's now or never. You remember that night,



"No! It's now or never." (Page 286)

Mary, don't you?" he rushed on, something like frenzy taking hold of him. "Six years ago? I slept on the floor in —"

"Yes, yes, I remember," she cried, bewildered.

"Well, that was the day that Chetwynd died. He did not run away. Mr. Carr has not been looking for him all these years. He's been dead all the time." He stopped to pull the collar away from his throat.

Adam Carr dropped his arms dejectedly and turned away.

"Impossible!" gasped Mary. "Why — why, Uncle Horace has been expecting him home all —"

"Uncle Horace doesn't know. No one knows but Adam Carr and — I. Sit down here beside me, girlie. I'll tell you the whole story, and Adam Carr will vouch for it. I'm going to tell Uncle Horace, too. He can do what he likes with me — hang me, if he wants to,— but I've just got to tell."

He drew her down beside him on the sofa, over in the darkest corner of the room. Then, for ten minutes, he delivered his soul to her. She sat as one petrified, white and still, staring with unblinking eyes at his twitching, distorted face all the while he poured out his unhappy story.

Once her gaze was diverted, ever so briefly, to follow his as it went to the broad, motionless figure of Adam Carr, who stood at the window looking out upon the street.

"But, Mary, Mr. Adam says it was not murder," pleaded Eric in conclusion. "He says it was an accident. It might just as well have been I who went over —"

"And he's been dead all these years," she murmured. "Out there in the ocean?"

"Yes."

"He can't be washed ashore? It was a great iron chest, you say?" she went on dully. Her hand went to her temple.

"For heaven's sake, Mary, don't put it —"

"And they think he is still alive?"

He nodded his head slowly, his lips writhing.

"Oh!" she cried, as if in dire pain. A great shudder ran through her body. "How horrible! Oh, Eric, it was not right! You don't know how they've suffered. I do. I have seen it all. And, God pity me, I have rejoiced in their misery more times than I can remember. I used to laugh,— yes, actually laugh,— to see Aunt Rena sitting there in the window hoping that he would come up the walk — Oh!" She buried her face in her hands.

He held her tight in his arms, moaning a sort of accompaniment to her dry, racking sobs. For a long time they rocked back and forth on the frail little sofa, clinging to each other as if fearing the presence of someone who stood ready to drag them apart forever.

"I *did* kill a man," groaned Eric at last. "They said I would, Mary."

"Don't, Eric! Please don't!"

"God!" burst from his tortured lips.

Adam Carr turned at this. For a minute he watched them through narrow eyes, then walked over to take his stand before them.

Eric looked up at him, dully.

"Tell her I've told the truth, Mr. Adam,— the honest truth," he begged.

"You've made an utter fool of yourself," remarked Adam, but in a way that was not unkindly.

Mary looked up in angry amazement. Her moist eyes swept the figure of the speaker with a look that would have shrivelled a less imperturbable person than Adam Carr.

"How dare you say that to my brother?" she cried.

Adam smiled, almost approvingly. "I'm not so sure that he's a fool after all, Mary. The secret is safe with you. Now, if you love him, help me to protect him against this idiotic thing he calls a conscience,— or maybe it's honour. I'm sorry he has told you all this. Not that it could be dragged out of you, my girl, with red-hot tongs, but that doesn't help matters. You —"

"I am glad he has told me," she exclaimed. "It isn't right that he should bear it alone. Oh, Eric, if you had only told me years ago! I could have helped you, I could have comforted you. Why,— why, you are *not* a murderer. It's preposterous!"

"We're agreed on that," said Adam. "But will your Uncle Horace be so considerate?"

Mary shuddered. "Eric, I am *so* afraid of Uncle Horace. He will be very bitter. He may —"

"See here, Mary," he broke in, coming to his feet with renewed resolution in his face, "you're not going to stand in my way, are you? You're not going to side with Mr. Adam, are you? If that's what you're thinking of, let me tell you it won't deter me. I'm going to Uncle Horace this evening." Turning to Adam, he said with absolute finality: "You may do as you choose, Mr. Adam, so far as backing me up is concerned."

Adam's smile was a wry one. "I don't occupy a very creditable position in the matter, my boy. Please don't overlook that little point. See here," with sudden vehemence: "do you think you're playing fair with me? Where does this leave me? I did the best I could for you, and now you break faith. I did not expect it of you."

"You have done a great deal for me," said Eric abjectly. "You must consider me an ingrate."

"Not exactly that. I can understand how you feel. It's not unnatural. You see, you're not morally guilty of a crime. It's irksome to live as if you were. I admire your courage, your honesty —"

"It isn't courage," cried Eric. "It's cowardice! Good heaven, do you think that if I was as brave as you are I'd go into a funk like this? No; I'm a coward. I can't face the music any longer. I've lost my nerve. Why, every time Aunt Rena looks at me out of those sad eyes, every time Uncle Horace forgets himself and lets the lines set about his lips, I shudder all over. I'm a coward, that's all there is to it."

"I shouldn't say that," said Adam quietly.

"Well, it's the truth!"

"I still maintain that my way is best," said the detective. "You'd better let me see you out of the woods, Eric. I'm used to it; I'm quite capable. The minute I tell them that Chetwynd died in South America, they'll be transformed. It's anxiety, dread, uncertainty that's doing the work for them now. Once they know —"

"No," said Eric firmly, "it's got to be my way."

"Which means, in other words, that you want to get rid of me as a mill-stone."

"Yes, Mr. Adam, that is one of the reasons."

Carr shrugged his shoulders. "Then, I've nothing more to say."

"But you *will* tell Uncle Horace just how it happened, won't you?" cried Mary anxiously.

He did not reply at once, but sat down in the rocker a few feet away, with his elbows on the arms of the chair, facing them. Although his face did not betray the fact that he was perturbed, an involuntary movement of the hands served to betray him. He took his pipe from his pocket and had it almost to his lips before he bethought himself and restored the disreputable thing to its habitual resting-place.

Mary was watching the set, hard features with narrowing eyes, in which hope and fear struggled for supremacy. Eric, with his hands jammed into his pockets, stared sullenly down at the man.

"Give me time to think," muttered Adam Carr.

"You surely will not desert him now," implored Mary. Her hand went forth in search of Eric's. Not meeting it, the tense fingers clutched the skirt of his coat in a frenzied grip.

"Horace may forgive Eric, but he'll never forgive me," said Adam slowly, calculatingly. "There's only one guilty person in this case, and that is me. Let's be perfectly frank about it. I am the one who has made Horace suffer, not you, Eric. Can't you see what he will do to me? He will take it all out of me. He will ruin me, destroy me. I won't say he can put me behind the bars, but he can make me the most despised creature in America."

"You should have thought of all this before," said Mary sharply.

"I have," quoth Adam, with a frown. If he meant to say more, he was checked by a sharp, eager exclamation from Eric.

"By George! Listen to me!" His face was bright with a new resolve. He leaned forward eagerly, his voice dropping to a tense, insistent half-whisper. "I know how I can protect you, Mr. Adam. It's as simple as A B C. You have stood by me; I'd be a dog to drag you down with me. Here's what I can and will do. I will not mention your name in connexion with the affair. I will not call on you as a witness. I'll leave you out of it altogether, and take the whole blame on myself. That will let you off clean as a whistle. There's no reason why you should be punished for —"

"Hold on, Eric," cried Adam, rising slowly from the chair to look the impassioned young man squarely in the eye. With an effort of the will, he managed to conceal the feeling of pride, of joy that Eric's words produced. "There are several obstacles to that sort of a plan. First, leaving me out of it, how are you going to account for the disposal of the body?"

A slight shudder ran over Eric's frame.

"Oh, I can say that I weighted it with iron and rowed out —"

"You haven't told a lie in connexion with the affair up to date, have you?" asked Adam levelly.

"Why, no — I haven't even mentioned —"

"Don't you think it's rather poor policy to begin now?"

"Well, it's the only way I can think of to keep your name out of it."

Adam had been thinking hard all this time. His active, resourceful brain had been groping for the means with which to successfully combat this rather primitive, quixotic sense of honesty that afflicted Eric. To gain time: that was Adam's sole purpose. The real object of his visit to the little Verner cottage was forgotten in the face of this amazing revolt. Strategy — ay, more than that would be required in the handling of the conscience-stricken man; harsh, unfeeling measures would be necessary. Nor was he thinking only of his own safety, although, somehow, it was becoming paramount. He loved Eric, in a strange, bear-like fashion peculiarly his own. He was a far-sighted man; he foresaw dark trials for the boy if his present purpose was carried out. It was quite impossible for him to realise that he, too, had been short-sighted. He had played a deep, ugly game without counting on the certainty of this very hour. Time now to curse his stupidity and to reckon the cost, not only to Eric but to himself.

"But suppose I don't choose to be left out of it, what then?" he demanded in a hard voice.

"I don't have to implicate you," went on Eric earnestly. "You can appear to be as much surprised as anyone when the truth comes out."

"Just go on being a fool detective, eh?" retorted Adam with grim humour. "Chasing a dead man for six years, eh? Do you think I have no pride? 'Pon my word, I'd rather be called a scoundrel than a fool."

Eric began to argue his point, but the older man cut him off short with the curt reminder that he was old enough to look out for himself.

"See here, Eric," he continued, ignoring the hurt look in his young friend's eyes, "we'll get right down to cases. If you go to Horace Blagden with your tale, I shall have to tell the world what I know of the affair. Do you realise what that may mean?"

"You saw the fight," cried Eric. "You can prove that it was self-defence,— no, an accident."

"I can do nothing of the kind," said Adam coldly. He had thought of a way.

"What do you mean?" stammered the other.

"Just this. *I did not see the fight.* I saw one blow struck. I do not know what went before. *I have only your word for that.* Not competent testimony, my boy."

Eric's face was a puzzle.

"I — I don't see what you are driving at, Mr. Adam. Surely you don't —" He stopped short, his lips twisting into a sickly smile.

"Don't what?"

"You don't mean that you doubt my word?"

Adam Carr shook his head. "I've always said it was an accident, haven't I?"

"Certainly. Then what do you mean?"

"Do you suppose that any court, knowing my interest in the case, will accept my statement that I *believed* it to be an accident?"

"Why not?"

"Simply because what I believe and what actually occurred are in no way connected by fact. You *did* strike him. I did not see him strike at you. So far as I can testify, you struck the only blow."

"Good heaven!"

"Just think it over, Eric," said Carr coolly. "Don't put your neck in a noose in the hope that I can get it out for you. He was a big, powerful chap. It doesn't seem likely that —"

"Why — why, curse you, do you mean to say that I struck him without warning?"

Eric was towering over the square, heavy figure, his face convulsed by rage. His arm was drawn back as if to strike. The older man did not flinch.

"You seem to forget that I taught you a blow that would be likely to catch any man off his guard. It is a blow that never fails to do the work. That was the only blow I saw pass between you and him. As I said before: just think it over."

He picked up his hat and strode toward the door. Eric sprang after him, rage giving way before apprehension and dismay.

"Are you turning against me?" he cried. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"I am going to my room in the hotel. Day after to-morrow we may hear of Chetwynd's death in South America. I am expecting a message to that effect. Believe me, I hope to receive the news before you go to your uncle with this tale of yours. It would hurt me more than I can tell, to be called to the witness stand *against you*, Eric. I am glad that I came here to-day. A good fairy must have sent me. I came for an entirely different mission, but — upon my soul, I've quite forgotten what it was. Good-bye."

He did not offer to shake hands with the amazed, panic-stricken young man, but walked calmly out of the door and into the street, an ominous figure that filled their eyes until it was lost behind the hedges,— and even longer, for they had him in mind for many minutes.

They had followed him to the door. Mary clung to her brother's rigid arm, staring down the grey, windswept street, a great and growing dread in her lovely eyes.

"What are you going to do, Eric?" she asked dully.

He started, and turned to look down into her eyes, as if suddenly aware of her nearness to him.

"Do?" he asked blankly. "Why, he's gone. He's in Baxter Street by this time."

"I wasn't thinking of him," she said, a shrill note beginning to make itself felt in her voice. "I mean about going to Uncle Horace."

"I can't believe that Adam has turned against me," went on Eric, as if stupefied. "But there was something ugly in what he said, wasn't there? It — it was like a threat. God! It *was* a threat!"

She shivered. "Is this all real, Eric? Am I having another of those terrible dreams? I am so cold. See! My hands are like ice. I — I —"

He clasped her in his arms. "God forgive me, little sister! I've blighted your whole life. Why,— oh, why did I tell you this beastly thing? Mr. Adam was right. He did his best to stop me. I'm a beast, a —"

"Don't, Errie,— don't! Oh, brother, brother! My big, good brother!"

He drew her back into the room, still holding her in his arms. For a long time they stood motionless and silent in the middle of the little parlour, dry-eyed, dry-lipped and unseeing. She shivered again.

"Close the door, Errie," she murmured. "It's queer how cold the air has grown. It's off the sea. When did the wind change?"

"I'll stir up the fire in the grate," he said, with nervous haste. "It's the dampness." He closed the door.

She watched him poke up the embers and pile on the chunks of wood.

"I hadn't noticed the change," he said mechanically. "It is off the sea."

"Where do you suppose he has gone?" she asked, drawing near to the grate.

He did not look up. She noted the greyish, bloodless look of his neck and half-averted cheek.

"We were standing at the corner above the Massasoit House when Uncle Horace somehow felt his presence. That was not more then ten minutes before I — What are you asking, Mary? Excuse me."

"Where has he gone?" she repeated shrilly.

"See here, Mary, I'm in for something nasty," he exclaimed, coming to his feet and running his hands into his pockets once more. "I don't know what to do. If I go to Uncle Horace now, Adam Carr will turn squarely against me. That's plain. Somehow, I can't find it in my heart to blame him, either. I suppose I ought to consider his position as well as my own. On the other hand, I can't go on this way any longer. It's unbearable. I can't even look at Uncle Horace and Aunt Rena without cursing myself for a beast. Adam Carr has never let up on them — not for an instant. He's been a devil, so far as they are concerned. I should have stopped it long ago."

He threw himself into a chair and stared, wide-eyed, at the crackling, snapping logs. Mary stood at his elbow, looking down upon him, her eyes full of love and pity. Presently she laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't believe Uncle Horace can forgive you, Eric," she said.

"He can't forgive me for letting it go on in the way it has," he groaned. "Why, it's been hell on earth for them, Mary."

"I pity them now," she said simply. "I never can love them — never! But I do pity them. If there is anything I can do, Errie dear, to make life easier, happier for them, I shall try my best to —"

He did not look up, but as she hesitated he said quickly:

"They don't want you to marry Jack Payson."

"Oh, Errie, can't they overcome —"

"There's a great and sufficient reason for their opposition, dear. Something you don't understand, but I do. Adam Carr's greatest triumph over Uncle Horace would come the day you married Jack Payson."

"I don't understand," she cried, bewildered.

He checked the impulse to blurt out the horrid truth, as he took it to be,—concerning John Payson. She loved the fellow. Why strike at a heart that was already sore and bleeding? Why add another cruel slash to the wounds that perhaps were marking it for life? And then, up from some dark, secret recess of his own heart, came an astonishing throb of pity for John Payson; a curious revolt within himself. After all, what wrong had John Payson done? Why strike an innocent, unsuspecting man in the back? Why inflict a wound that could never be closed?

"It's something that dates back to the time when Payson's father was alive," equivocated he.

"He was lost at sea. Were they enemies?"

"I only know that Uncle Horace hated Jack Payson's father."

"Then why did he put Jack in the bank?"

"Well, he got him out of it soon enough, didn't he?" demanded her brother, hard put for explanations.

She waited a moment. "There is something you are holding back, Eric," she said, closing her eyes. "How would you feel, dear, if I were to hint that Joan Bright isn't what she ought to be?"

"Joan!" he cried out, a new despair rising in his voice. He covered his eyes with his hand. "What will she think when she hears what I have come to?"

"If she loves you, she will not let *anything* come between," said Mary, slowly, significantly. The true appeal in her words was lost on him. He walked over to the window and stood there, staring blankly out into the little garden. For a long time she kept her eyes on his straight, tense figure. Then she moved up closer to the fire, resting a hand on the mantelpiece as she looked down into the writhing flames. Finally her shoulders relaxed and drooped, and her whipped gaze went once more to the back of him who was so racked and harassed.

She crossed slowly to his side.

"Eric," she said, her voice very low and unwavering, "I will give Jack up if it will make you happy. I — I shan't see him again."

"Good heaven, Mary, you — you would do that?" he cried hoarsely. "Why, little sister, you — you — No, by heaven, you do not make me happy. You make me feel so small, so puny, so ashamed of —"

"Don't, Eric, I beg of you!" She spoke rapidly, jerkily. "I mean it. I will try to make them a little bit happier than they are. I will do this for you —" She stopped in the middle of the sentence, the soft, warm glow in her eyes fading like a flash. In its stead came an almost venomous glitter, completely transforming her lovely face. "But, wait! What am I saying? Why should I do this for them? They may try to hang you, Eric."

He took a long, deep breath. "I can't stay in the house any longer, Mary. I've got to get out where I can breathe." He started toward the door, catching up his hat as he passed by the table.

"Where are you going?" she cried.

"I don't know — oh, anywhere. Listen! Can you hear the breakers? A mile and a half to Stone Wall. There's a big sea running. Mary, I haven't been on Stone Wall in six years. I'm going out there now. I'm going to face the thing I've dreaded all these years. He's out there somewhere. He hasn't moved. It's horrible to think of. But, I'm going to smash this contemptible fear, once and for all. I'll be back by dinnertime. Out there I can think it over, as Adam says. Don't worry, dear, I will not —"

"I am going with you, Errie," she said quietly.

"No!" he cried, but she was rushing off for her hat and mackintosh.

Half an hour later they crossed the bleak, wind-blown stretch of meadow land and came out upon the rocks. They had not spoken in all this time. The stiff gale that blew in from the Atlantic drove the words back into their throats. A fine drizzle smote them in the face. They had not noticed that it was misting when they left the cottage.

"This way," he managed to say when they came to the forlorn coast-road which wound through the rocks. "We'll cross the bridge. If you care to look, you may see where he fell. The clump of vines, too."

She kept pace with him, uttering no word.

They stopped in the middle of the bridge, leaning side by side on the stout, new rail to look down into the ravine. He pointed to the jagged rocks and then to the mass of vines behind which Chetwynd's body had been secreted on that memorable day. Then they passed on, skirting Bud's Rock, and bent their bodies against the gale that shrieked across the rocky waste. It was a chill, raw wind that beat in their faces and cut through the clothes they wore, an insistent wind that seemed bent on keeping them back from the brow of the cliffs.

At last they stood at the edge of the great Stone Wall, with the ocean snarling madly at the crags, two hundred feet below. Never had they seen the sea so wild, so furious, so ugly. It came in, black and devilish, with none of the rollicking blues and greens that they were so used to seeing; nothing but great black things with hoary crests and foaming maws, crashing against the huge rocks that stood guard in front of the palisade, swirling in between and bounding back again as if surprised to find resistance so strong.

A drab sky seemed to flatten itself like the low top of a circus tent over the whole world, sloughing off into a thick, impenetrable bank of fog which brought the bleak horizon close to hand, and out of which slipped shadowy billows that took vivid shape as they raced into the arena. On they came with ever-increasing size and velocity, only to shatter themselves against the mammoth barrier that had defied them for ages and ages. They struck with splintering force, roaring like a thousand cannons, swishing with the mighty hiss of a hundred cataracts, and then ground their way back for another and mightier assault.

The puny spectators at the top of the cliff braced themselves against the wind and stared out over the majestic foe of all mankind. Mary pointed to a vast cleft in the wall far to the left; the fury there was greater than anywhere else, the struggle more sublime.

"It's like a Paul Daugherty painting, Eric. How terrible it is to-day!" she cried in his ear.

He was looking far out across the bounding waves, his eyes set on a certain spot in the shifting scape.

"The sea was like a mill-pond that night, Mary. How different now. It seems as though it is working up all this rage for my especial benefit. It's a grewsome thought, but do you know I have a feeling that — that our cousin is doing all this. He's trying to burst the sides of that staunch old chest, just as the genii of old tried to split the jar that the fisherman found and opened. See! Follow my finger, Mary. Out there beyond Lord's Point, eight miles or more, where it's three hundred fathoms deep,— that's where Chetwynd lies. No sea is strong enough to move that coffin of his. It's buried too deep. All the grave-robbers in the world could not snatch Chetwynd from the grave he's in. No! He's there forever and ever. Isn't it horrible!"

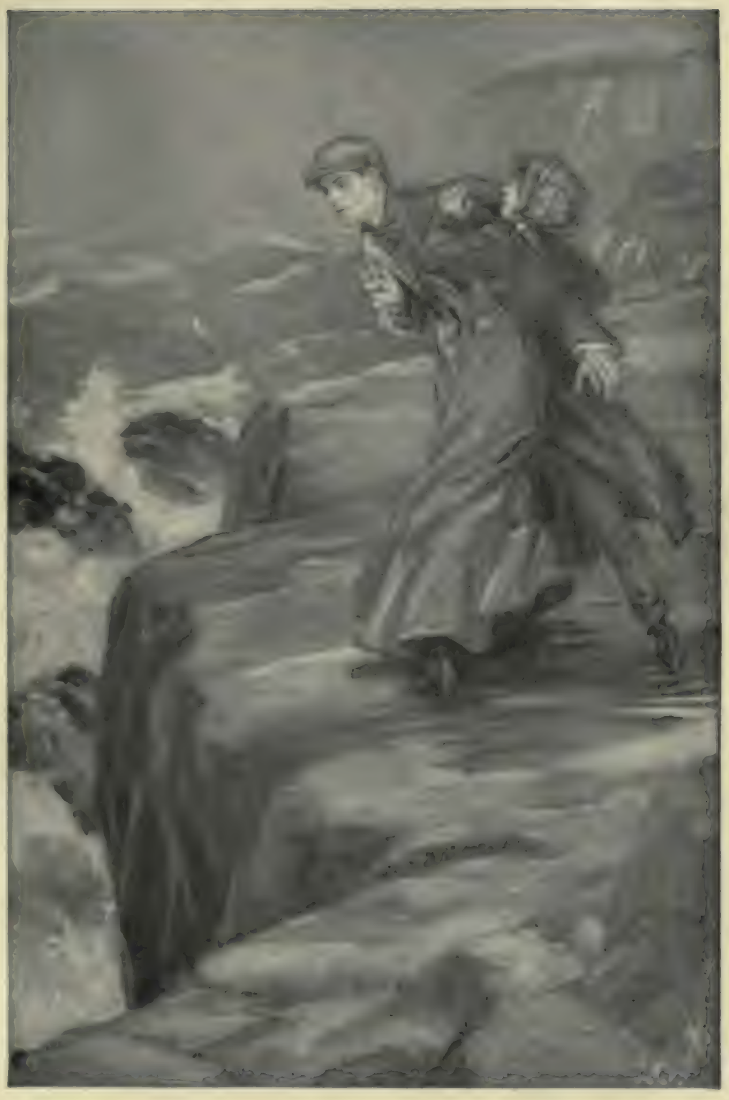
"Come, Eric, let us go back. Let us go far away from here. Why should we stay in Corinth? Why stay here by the sea? Think of the great, dry, peaceful West, where the mountains —"

"Listen," he broke in, his voice rising to a monotonous, sing-song pitch, "listen to me. The fishing off the Point used to be the best along the coast. They tell me there is no catch at all in these days, and hasn't been for half a dozen years. The great catches are no more. The fishermen say that the stretch from here to the Eddy Islands is hoodooed. They can't understand it. But I could tell them, Mary, I could tell them. There's something out there that scares them away, that —"

"Why, Eric!" she cried. "You are losing your mind. What a silly thing to say. As if *that* could make any difference to a fish! Don't be ridiculous."

"Well, it's queer, isn't it?" he insisted. "You'll have to admit it." He stared out across the tumbling waters, white fear in his wide-spread eyes. She gave him a swift, furtive look, and then fell to trembling all over. Was he going mad?

"Come away, Eric," she cried, tightening her grasp on his arm. "It's horrid here. Let us go back. It's tea time. See, it will soon be dark."



"No; it can't come ashore. It's out there to stay.
(Page 303)

"I wonder — I wonder if it could be possible for waves as big as these to wash an iron chest ashore. Maybe it's coming now, rolling over and over on the bottom of —"

She screamed aloud.

"Don't!"

He had drawn close to the brink of the precipice, the better to search the foaming crannies far below with dreadful, eager eyes. After a moment, he obeyed the frantic tugging of her hands and fell back to a less perilous footing, a short laugh cracking on his lips.

"No;" he said, with a note of triumph in his voice, "it can't come ashore. It's out there to stay."

"Come, Eric," she pleaded.

He threw his arm around her. "What a beast I am to keep you up here in the wind and rain. Why, you're drenched. You're half-frozen." Swiftly aroused to compassion and concern for her, he led her away from the wild brink to a less exposed spot in the lee of a jutting rock. Here they were sheltered from the wind and the freezing drizzle; but the gale shrieked about their ears, and the sea roared all the more loudly because they had slunk back from its fury. Great gulls careened past them, their screams no more than sharp, staccato barks, as of a dog in flight.

The terror in Mary's eyes was most distressing to him. She was trembling violently. Her wet hair had blown across her face. Her figure was limp, pathetic.

"We'll go back, dearie," he cried. "I'm sorry you came. You will be ill for all this. I should have come alone. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to smash this fear and dread I've had for years. Well, I've done it. I'm no longer afraid of Stone Wall or the sea out yonder. I can laugh at them and at myself for having been afraid. I can laugh at —"

Suddenly he stopped as if petrified. Even as he uttered his hapless boast, there came floating up to him on the wings of the gale, a harsh, never-to-be-forgotten laugh, mocking, distant, unlocated; came floating up as a part of the gibbering turmoil, out of the wind-racked Atlantic, out of Nowhere!

"Good God!" he gasped, shrinking back against the rock with the glare of horror in his eyes.

She looked at him in utter amazement — and dread. The terror in his face was something she was never to forget.

"Eric," she whined. "What is it?"

His voice was hoarse. "Did — did you hear it?"

"There is someone out here besides ourselves, Eric," cried she, "so, don't be afraid. We are not alone, dear. I heard someone —"

He turned upon her with a glad shout. "You — you did hear it, then? You heard the laugh?"

"Yes, of course. Tramps, I suppose, sheltered in the caves over —"

"Thank God! Thank God!" he shouted. "If you heard it, too, then it must have been real."

"Real? The laugh? Why,— why, Eric, how queerly you act. What of it? Was it the laugh that — Ah! See! There they are,— two of them."

She was pointing excitedly along the crest of the cliff toward the right.

In bold relief against the leaden sky, the figures of two men stood out, clearly defined. Not more than one hundred yards separated the two couples on this bleak, supposedly deserted stretch of Stone Wall.

In sheer amazement the Midthornes gazed at their fellow-adventurers. Slowly into their intelligence stole the knowledge that these men were not strangers. They knew them well! Great, rain-coated men were they, wind-blown and sturdy, and they looked not toward them, but out to sea.

Again the raucous laugh was wafted across the rocks.

"By heaven, Mary, it's Adam Carr!" cried Eric, passing his hand over his eyes, a great weakness assailing him.

Mary was staring hard at Adam Carr's companion, a tall man in storm-hat and coat.

"And John," she cried, amazed. "John Payson!"

At that instant the two men turned, as if so ordered by some strange, compelling force, and looked squarely at the spot where the Midthornes stood.

CHAPTER XVII

A BEGGAR COMES KNOCKING

For many seconds they stared intently at each other. It was quite evident that John Payson had not been aware of this propinquity until the present moment. His surprise was apparent even at so great a distance. Not so Adam Carr. There could be no doubting the fact that he had known all along of the Midthornes' presence on Stone Wall. Either he had followed them to the wild, lonely spot, or he had exercised that amazing sense of clairvoyancy which he possessed, guessing correctly that Eric would venture first of all to the scene of his so-called crime before going to his uncle with the confession.

At last Payson sent an eager cry across the rocks to Mary, calling out her name as he abruptly left his companion's side to make his way toward her. Adam Carr sprang after him, clutching his arm. The younger man came to a standstill, plainly amazed by the act of his companion. A moment later they were to be seen in earnest conversation, the older man apparently calm and obdurate, the younger expostulating vehemently. Thrice the latter sought to shake off the retaining hand.

Finally they gave over talking and turned to contemplate the couple in the lee of the rock. Two strong figures were they, silhouettes against the grey, unlovely sky, defying the wind that scoured the cliffs.

"Eric," said Mary, her lips close to his ear, "is there really a resemblance, or is my mind so full of Adam

Carr that I can see no one else? Isn't it odd that I should —"

"It's not a fancy, Mary," said he gravely, without taking his eyes from the two men. "The likeness is there. It's real. Now, maybe you can begin to understand."

"But I don't understand," she cried in perplexity. Suddenly light burst upon her. "Oh, Eric, you — you *can't* mean that — that he —"

"See for yourself, dear. It's odd you never noticed it before."

A low moan fell from her lips. She hid her face against his shoulder, blotting out the fantastic vision that smote her so cruelly.

He was quick to comfort her. "Nothing is sure in this world, Mary darling, and this may be a co-incidence, a freak of Nature."

"Take me home, Eric," came in smothered tones from his shoulder.

He glanced toward the men on the brow of the cliff. Adam Carr waved his hand in a friendly fashion, and an instant later John Payson did the same. Then, with seeming reluctance, he turned to follow the older man. Side by side, they hurried away from the edge of the Stone Wall, urged to swifter strides by the wind at their backs. Not once did they look behind.

"They're going, Mary," said Eric.

She raised her eyes. Together they watched the two men until they were lost to sight among the rocks that lined the distant roadway.

"I am afraid of him, Eric," she moaned. "I am afraid of Jack now. There was something terrible about him, something I'd never seen before,— never even dreamed of."

"If he isn't the son of Ad —"

"Stop!" she almost screamed. "I don't want you to say it. You may be wrong. God may have played a trick on us, on every one. I'm beginning to think that God isn't above small things like that. No, no! We must never speak of it. It hurts, Eric, oh, how it hurts."

"On my soul, Mary, I'm sorry for *him*. He is a decent chap. I —"

"He is a man, Errie, and I love him. I love him! I shall love him till I die."

"But you can see how impossible it will be for you to —"

"Haven't I said I would give him up?" she cried, beating upon his breast with her clenched hands. "Don't ask me to say anything more."

"Maybe it's all right, after all," he began, but she stopped him.

"If it's all right, why should he be out here to-day with that man? No! He stands with Adam Carr and he stands for Adam Carr. He is against you. There is a greater influence than my love at work with him."

"He tried to come to you."

"Then, what was it that held him back?" she demanded fiercely.

He held her off, looking straight into her eyes, and spoke steadily, even calmly.

"He had just been listening to Adam Carr's story of the thing that lies out there in the sea. That's why. He knows about *me*, Mary. That's what held him back."

"Eric," she said, after a moment, "I think we'd better tell everything to Uncle Horace."

"Yes," said he. "I've made up my mind to do it."

"Wait till to-morrow, dear."

"Why put it off?"

"Please, Errie,— just because I ask it of you."

A sharp exclamation fell from his lips. The next instant he was pointing in the direction of Bud's Rock. A man was hurrying toward them, a distant, wind-fighting figure that came on swiftly, regardless of the rough, uneven going and the crevasses. He held his hand before his nose and mouth, to breathe the better in the face of the gale.

"It's Jack!" she cried eagerly.

Her brother's arms dropped from her shoulders, and a muttered word of execration ground its way through his teeth. Then, with no word of explanation, he advanced to meet the on-comer, holding her tightly by the arm.

Half-way across the bleak plateau, John Payson stopped, planting himself squarely in their path. There he waited until they came up. Eric would have passed him by, with a hoarse command to Mary, but her lover shifted his position, obstructing the way.

"What do you want?" demanded Eric, coming to a standstill and regarding him with blazing eyes.

"I want Mary," said Jack Payson resolutely. "You're a beast, Eric, to bring her out here on a day like this. Do you understand? A beast."

Mary swirled in front of Eric, throwing herself on his breast, and clinging to him. She did not utter a word, but the act was significant.

For a full minute her brother glared at Payson. Then his anger fled before justice and reason.

"You're right, Payson," he exclaimed miserably. "A selfish beast. Will you come along with us? Help me to get her back to the house."

Without a word, Payson sprang to her side, clasping one of her arms in his. Together they half-carried her across the wild, open plateau, across the ill-fated bridge and into the protected highway.

She was limp with fatigue and excitement, and the pain that was in her heart. In the shelter of the defile, she begged him to stop until she could recover her breath and her lost composure.

"I couldn't stand it, Mary," Payson was saying, a world of anxiety in his voice. "I couldn't leave you out there. Adam tried to keep me from coming back, but I —"

"I am so glad you came, Jack," she cried. "I wondered why you went away without —"

"Here, here!" expostulated Eric. "Are you forgetting what you said back there?"

"No," she faltered; "but I can't help saying this, Errie. Oh, I don't know what I am to do." It was a wail that cut him like a sharp-edged sword.

He turned upon Payson.

"What were you doing out there with Adam Carr?" he demanded.

"I'm not answerable to you," retorted Payson.

"Don't quarrel," pleaded Mary. "Please don't quarrel."

"What was Adam Carr saying to you?" went on Eric recklessly.

"See here, Midthorne," began the other hotly, "you've said some ugly things to me lately. I don't care to hear anything more from you. Adam Carr is my friend. He's yours, too. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for —"

"What was he telling you?" repeated Eric.

Payson opened his lips to speak, then thought better of the impulse. He contented himself with a long, hard, even suspicious, scrutiny of the questioner's face.

"Some other time, if you please," he said curtly. "It is our duty to get poor Mary home as quickly as possible. Come, dear."

But she clung to Eric, ignoring the outstretched hand. Payson fell away as if he had been slapped in the face. He kept pace with them all the way to the Verner Cottage, but not a word fell from his lips in all that distance.

It was quite dark when they came to the gate; the sharp, chill mist was still blowing. Mary's teeth were chattering.

"Good night," said Jack Payson.

Eric hesitated. He had been thinking hard all the way up from the coast, but his thoughts were not hard. Somehow the manliness, the self-restraint, the very thoughtfulness of John Payson wrought a subtle change in his estimate of the man. He was wondering if he was not really grateful to him, if he was not, after all, more than grateful. Years ago he had been sorry for him. Was he not sorry for him now?

"Won't you come in, Jack?" he asked abruptly, holding the gate open.

Payson stared, first at one, then the other. He began to stammer an apology for hurrying on.

"Come in to the fire," said Mary, looking at him over Eric's shoulder.

The look in those dark, piteous eyes decided him.

"I want to be friendly with you, Eric," he said, "and I want to speak with you about something that has just transpired. I will come in for a few minutes. First of all, Mary must get out of her wet clothes. And you, too. Something hot to drink."

"And bed for her," added Eric meaningly.

They entered the cottage. The room was quite dark, except for the space directly in front of the dying embers in the fire-place. The trio, with their shadows, filled the corner of the room nearest the door, where they had paused at a word from Eric.

He glanced keenly about the room, then gave vent to a short, apologetic laugh.

"I half expected to find Adam Carr sitting here," he said.

"He took the six-twenty for New York," said Payson.

Eric started. "Are you sure?" uneasily.

"Certainly. At least, that was his intention. He had time to make it. We drove to Stone Wall, you see."

"Then you got there after we did?"

Payson smiled faintly, almost ironically. "Spies don't precede their victims as a general thing," he said. "I'll replenish the fire while you are changing."

Mary left the room without once turning her bent head to look at her would-be protector. Eric followed her. He was back in a moment, however. Payson looked up from the pile of wood and kindling over which he stooped.

"Take off your wet shoes and stockings," he ordered sharply.

"Time enough for that," said Midthorne, coming up to stand over him. "What were you doing out there? Quick, before Mary comes back."

"I'll fix the fire first," said Payson deliberately.

Neither spoke for three or four minutes, while he laid the paper and kindling. When the fresh, blue flames began to dodge in and out among the logs, he arose and faced Mary's brother, coolly brushing the wood-dust from his hands.

"We were out there to look at the place where my father was lost. My *father*, mind you," he said with curious emphasis.

Eric's satirical smile was not lost on him.

"Would you mind taking off your sou'wester, Payson?" he said, irrelevantly. "It's dripping all over the rug."

"I'll stand on the hearth-stone," said the other. They were sparring for time in a most deliberate manner.

"Then, move over a bit. I'm also wet."

They stood side by side, with their backs to the blaze: two tall, tense figures that waited. Outside the wind shrieked and crooned by turns; the windows rattled in their frames; a soft, insistent beating on the panes, as of tiny insects hurtling, told of the rain that blew.

"I waited at old Jabe's cottage for Adam," said Payson abruptly, looking straight before him. "I'd been worrying over something you put into my head, Midthorne. I couldn't go to my mother about it. Adam was the only one who could explain. He did not hesitate. I had a buggy there. We drove out to Stone Wall. He showed me where my father's schooner was last seen afloat, and where the wreckage came in, and the dead bodies of the crew. At the mouth of the ravine. My father went down and never came ashore. The schooner is out there now, on the bottom, half-way to Eddy's Islands, a hundred fathoms down. And there, Eric, is where my father was buried thirty-two years ago."

"Is that all he said?"

"No, he said my mother was true to my father, as true as steel."

He was still staring at the opposite wall, his face set and white.

"Nothing about Chetwynd?" demanded Eric bluntly.

Payson turned in surprise. "Chetwynd?"

"Didn't he tell you that Chetwynd is out there, too, in an iron-bound chest?"

"Good heaven! What are you talking about?" cried the other, in genuine amazement.

"Never mind," said Eric grimly. "What else did he say about — about me?"

"That you as much as accused him of being my father," said Payson, with wonderful self-control.

"I didn't put it just that way. I as much as accused you of being his son. There *is* a difference."

"I ought to kill you."

"Of course, he denied you," said Eric.

"Denied me? Oh, I see. You mean he disowned me," said Payson grimly.

"I wonder at your complacency," said the other, surveying him in no little admiration.

"It is not the time for anger," was the calm retort. "There is too much at stake. I have had many lessons in self-restraint. Wall Street is a great teacher and a great leveller of personal vanities. I've wanted to kill a good many men since I went there, Midthorne. May I ask what grounds you have for assuming that *he* is my father?"

"The resemblance," said Eric bluntly.

Payson was silent for a minute or two. Involuntarily his gaze sought the mirror that hung on the opposite wall. The room was half-dark.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, his eyes suddenly contracting and expanding. He passed a hand over his own face, as if to see whether the movement would be reflected in the looking-glass.

"You see?" said Eric gently, a great pity in his heart.

"It's — it's incredible! He spoke of the resemblance, but I had no idea it was so marked. Why,— why, I can see his eyes, his nose, his —"

"See here, Jack," broke in Midthorne impulsively, "I'm sorry for all this. I can't tell you how sorry I am. From the bottom of my heart, I hope it can all be cleared up satisfactorily. I hope it is nothing more than a curious freak of Nature."

Payson turned on him furiously. "My mother is an honest woman! She couldn't have done the horrible thing you are accusing her of. Only prostitutes descend to —" He stopped suddenly.

Eric had clapped his hands to his eyes, a deep groan breaking through his bloodless lips.

The other understood. "I'm sorry, Eric," he muttered, forgetting his own emotions in contemplation of his companion's sudden pain. "I forgot —"

Eric cut him off, his pride aflame. "I don't want your pity, or your explanations, or —"

Payson considerately left his side and walked to the window, peering out into the night, giving Midthorne time to recover himself.

After a few minutes Eric spoke.

"How does *he* account for the resemblance?" he asked quietly.

Payson returned to his place on the hearth-stone. "I am willing to discuss these things with you, Midthorne, because you are Mary's brother, and because you have a perfect right to know who and what I am. I'd do just as you are doing if I had a sister and it was you who wanted to marry her. I'd ask questions of you, just as —"

"And I'd tell you to go to the devil!"

"But," went on the other calmly, "if she loved you and you loved her, and I knew you to be an honourable, well-meaning chap,— as you are, Eric,— I'd give her over to you in a minute."

"I daresay," remarked Eric bluntly.

Payson chose again to ignore an offensive remark. "But I would ask questions, as I said before," he went on. "They would relate to you and not to the people who brought you into the world. You ask me how Adam accounts for the resemblance. Well, he doesn't attempt to do so. He knew my father well. They were boys and men together. All he will say is that I am like my father, and that my father was Henry Payson, who lies out there in the Atlantic. That is all I can get out of him. I'll confess there's an air of mystery about it, greater than ever, now that I've looked squarely into your looking-glass. My own seems a little less brutal. But he swears on his soul, as he loves me,— and I know he does,— that I have nothing to fear. Curiously, however, he forbids me to question my mother."

"Aha!" ejaculated his listener.

"He is right," protested Payson. "How can I go to her with — well, with questions?"

His voice shook with the sudden rush of an emotion that came over him so swiftly that he could not suppress it. He turned his back quickly and clenched his hands in the violent effort to regain control of himself.

"You can't go to her," cried Eric, casting off all reserve. "Not for all the world. Come, come, Jack, buck up! I am the last person in the world to condemn you or any other man. If you can bring yourself to accept an apology from me, I offer it to you here and now, in my own house. What is more, I withdraw my opposition so far as you and Mary are concerned."

Payson had whirled and was staring at him with incredulous eyes.

"I am not fool enough to ask you to overlook the insults I have offered," went on Midthorne rapidly. "You will consider them worse than insults when you learn the truth about the man who —"

With a glad cry, Jack Payson stretched out his hands and grasped Eric's shoulders.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed, his eyes aglow. "You're hipped about something. Don't you suppose I can see there's something wrong? You're not yourself. That's why I can and do overlook the so-called insults. I don't hold anything against you, Eric. *We* can't help being friends. You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that you won't stand in the way of our marriage. It would have been unpleasant to defy you, but that —"

"Just a moment, Payson," interrupted Eric. "I must tell you that Mary has decided that she can't marry you. We've talked it over."

"What!" gasped the other, dismayed. His jaw dropped. "Impossible! I don't believe it. She loves me. Nothing could change —"

Eric held up his hand, smiling rather wanly as he met the distressed look in the eyes of Mary's lover.

"But I'll see to it that she reconsiders. She *does* love you. She's doing all this for my sake, and because I have been so selfish as to make it quite impossible for her to do anything else but give you up. Take off your coat, Jack. I'd like to have you stay for dinner with us. But before you accept the invitation, I have something I want to say to you. I have a confession to make. I'm going to give it to the world to-morrow, but you shall have it first of all."

Back in the little dining-room the single maid-of-all-work was laying the table. With the opening and closing of the kitchen-door there came subtly into the front part of the house the fragrant aroma of boiling coffee.

"A confession?" demanded Payson, all at sea over the riotous turn his emotions had taken. "What can you have to confess?"

The door of the hall opened suddenly. Mary stood before them, looking from one to the other with dark, questioning eyes. She had heard the last few words of Eric's speech from behind the partly opened door, as she paused there for a final touch to her hair. A dainty, exquisite housegown of pink enveloped her slender figure.

"He has no confession to make," she protested shrilly. "Go away, Jack, please go away. I must talk with him alone."

Both men started forward, actuated by totally different impulses.

"I'll go, Mary, if you ask it of —" began one, with an eloquent tenderness in his voice. He felt rather than understood the gravity of the situation.

"Wait!" remonstrated the other. "It's only fair to Jack, Mary. I've asked him to stay. But it must be settled beforehand, whether he is with me or against me. Please go back to your room, dear, until I've —"

"No," she said firmly, advancing into the room. "Jack, dear, if you love me, *go!*"

Payson looked from one to the other, in plain distress.

"If he really loves you, he'll stay and hear what I have to say. That will be the test," said Eric.

"Will you go, Jack?" she pleaded, coming up to him and putting her hands on his arms.

"Certainly," he said.

Eric, in dumb wonder, watched him slip into the storm coat he had discarded the moment before. He offered no further resistance to his departure, but seemed literally to shrink into the background, although, in plain truth, he did not move an inch from the spot on which he stood.

Mary walked to the door with her lover. There he turned and put his strong hands on her shoulders. He made no vulgar display of his love; and it was a great, masterful love. His eyes alone caressed her.

"I'll come to-morrow, Mary. Whatever it is that distresses you,— and Eric, too,— thresh it all out to-night. It's better that you should. Then, dear heart, when I come to-morrow I shall be able to help you. Ask anything of me. I am your slave. Good night. Good night, Eric."

He passed out into the night, gently closing the door behind him. For a moment she stood where he left her, stared dumbly at the closed door. The sound of his footsteps crossing the porch came to her, then the brisk tread on the gravel walk.

She put her arms against the door and laid her head upon them, burying her face. For a long time she held this rather tragic position. There was no sound in the room. Eric was watching her inertly. The maid-of-all-work dropped a knife on the dining-room floor. They did not hear it strike.

At last she raised her face, looking straight above her, as if to heaven. After a moment, she turned to her brother.

"You must change your clothes, Errie. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes," she said wearily.

"You've just *got* to be happy," he cried from the very depths of his tortured soul. "My poor, brave little Mary."

She smiled wanly. "Dear old Errie!"

. . . .

Hours afterward, they sat before the cheery fire-place, silent, reflective, depressed. It had been a sorry meal, that dinner of theirs. The garrulous New England servant, old for her years,— which were surprisingly few as things go in old New England,— gave up all efforts to draw the master and mistress into conversation. Never before, in all her time as "help," had she failed so utterly to inspire communicativeness. It certainly was upsetting. Her name was Lizzie,— a New England Lizzie, at that. An Elizabeth by any other name would have smelled a rat.

No word had passed between brother and sister for the matter of an hour or more. Her hand lay clasped in his on the arm of the chair he occupied. Their thoughts were their own. She had kissed him when he announced his decision to put no obstacle in the way of John Payson's courtship.

Suddenly there came a rapping at the door, a gentle, measured tapping that rose distinct above the boisterous bedlam of the winds.

A sort of terror took hold of them. The hand clasp tightened, their eyes grew wide with wonder and alarm. They waited, staring into each other's eyes, motionless in the chairs, their hearts thumping loudly: waited for the ghostly sound to be repeated. Eric's ears, strangely enough, were strained to catch the sound of a well-remembered laugh.

Again the tapping, still gentle but a little more imperative. They turned their faces toward the door. Their eyes were glued to the prim white knob. It turned, and the door was slowly pushed ajar.

A tall figure stood on the threshold, outlined against the blackness beyond. A gaunt, thin figure that waited there for a word of welcome from within.

The picture held for a minute. Then Eric sprang to his feet with a cry, more of relief than surprise.

"Uncle Horace!"

Involuntarily Mary glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. The thought uppermost in her mind was revealed in that significant act. What was Horace Blagden doing abroad at this time of night? At half-past nine, and such a night as this! She started forward impulsively.

"What has happened, Uncle Horace?" she cried. These were the first words she had spoken to him in many weeks.

"May I come in?" asked Horace, rather humbly — for him. He looked thinner, more ascetic than ever before, in the long black raincoat and the white kerchief that protected his throat from the shrill winds. His tall hat seemed to set lower on his head; his thin shoulders were higher; his eyes appeared to have shrunken farther back into their sockets. A dripping umbrella hung suspended from his gloved hand.

He seemed to have aged vastly in the few hours that had passed since Eric's conversation with him in the public square.

The young man sprang forward and grasped his uncle's hand, suddenly aroused to a sense of duty — and compassion. Mr. Blagden stepped inside, but, responding to the habit of a lifetime, caught himself up in time, and turned to desposit his umbrella in the niche outside the door, which he closed gently an instant later.

"Is there anything wrong with Aunt Rena?" demanded Eric. "What brings you out on a night like this?"

"I shan't remove my coat, Mary," said Mr. Blagden, as she took his hat and stood waiting for him to unfasten the cape of his coat. "It *is* a dreadful night. I thought I should be blown away crossing the common. How warm and cosey you have made it here. 'Pon my word, I had no idea Mrs. Verner's place was so attractive."

"Sit down, Uncle," said Eric, pulling a chair up to the grate. "I — we are glad to see you here," he floundered, considerably at a loss for words.

"Thank you," said Horace. "Perhaps it would be better if I removed my coat. An umbrella is of scant service on a night like this, what with the wind blowing and the rain coming from all sides."

Eric relieved him of the coat, while Mary undid the muffler. To their amazement, he wore, instead of the customary frock-coat, the familiar old dressing gown they had known since childhood. With one accord, they looked at his feet. They were encased in the ancient carpet slippers that Aunt Rena had made for him a score of years before, once a toasted brown, now a water-soaked black.

"For heaven's sake!" cried Mary aghast.

Noting their concentrated gaze, he looked down. For a moment he was silent. Then he sat down rather abruptly in the big chair.

"Well, I — I declare!" he murmured, blinking his eyes. "I — I hadn't noticed that I —"

They did not wait for him to finish the plaintive comment on his own unhappy plight. Mary gave commands, and both set about to provide warm stockings and slippers for him. He submitted to the changes without a protest, and even smiled when she produced a huge pair of gum-boots from the hall-closet.

"You will catch your death-cold," she said. "How could you think of coming out in those slippers, Uncle Horace? They —"

His smile deepened. "That's just it, my dear," he said. "I *didn't* think of coming out in them. Dear me, I — I — But, of course, I was in a great hurry. I don't believe I have ever ventured beyond the porch in these slippers before. You are very good, both of you. Very good."

They stood above him, looking down with puzzled, distressed eyes, both suddenly mute in the presence of what now shaped itself into a tragedy.

Mr. Blagden held out his hands to the fire, shivering as with a chill. Then he allowed his gaze to sweep the warm, lamp-lit room.

"You are very comfortable here, I am sure," he said slowly, as if weighing something in his mind. "Very comfortable and happy in your own little home."

"Yes," said they, without thinking.

His shoulders seemed to settle deeper in the chair, his chin sank ever so slightly.

"I — I fear, then, that my mission to-night is — er — ahem! — a rather hopeless one. If you will help me on with those boots, Eric, I will go back to your aunt —"

"In heaven's name, Uncle Horace, what has happened?" cried Eric. "What is it?"

Mr. Blagden looked from one to the other before responding. There was something abjectly pathetic in his face. He gulped, and his firm square chin trembled.

"Well,— you see,—" he began, with an effort, "— I came over to-night to ask you both to come back to — to —" He got no farther. His voice choked and tears started up in his eyes,— eyes that had not felt the smart of tears since boyhood's earliest pains.

The Midthornes, in that moment's utter crumbling on the part of the great man of Corinth, felt the passing of a life-long spirit of antagonism and restraint. It melted and oozed away, leaving their hearts empty, and aching, and cleansed of all the things that rankled.

They were young and strong, and their souls were sweet despite the bitter seeds that this gaunt old man had planted in his years of plenty. Now he was come to his days of famine. He had sown, and he had reaped, and his bins were empty. He was poor, he had come to beg!

They stood beside him. Their hands fell upon his drooping shoulders, and rested there while the strong current of human sympathy gushed from their hearts into the famished soul of this wondering old man.

He looked up, strangely dazed; he could not understand the sensation that was creeping over him. He had never felt anything just like it before in all his life. No one had ever presumed to such gentle familiarity, such frank fearlessness. It *was* a sensation.

"Why, Mary —" he began, a great question leaping into his wet eyes. He tried himself first, before going on, just to see if he *could* smile as she was smiling.

Then, feeling his lips relax, he could not trust himself to further speech for very fear of saying something that might destroy the sweetness of his discovery.

And so they waited until the warmth was in them all, until the heart-beats were strong and free.

At last Mr. Blagden spoke. His voice was low and full of gentleness.

"Of course, I can't think of asking you to leave a cheery, delightful nest like this for that cold, barren place I call home," he said wistfully. "It's not to be thought of. We — your aunt and I — were so selfish as to hope you might come back if I were eloquent enough to — But, of course, we couldn't have known how nicely you are situated here. This little room is more eloquent than I could ever hope to be. It is an argument that I cannot meet." His bony fingers suddenly gripped the arms of the chair. "But, God help me! I can't begin to tell you how bleak and cold and dead *our* rooms are,— how great the contrast. Ah, my children, you have *all* the light. We have none. Your Aunt Rena is —" Again he stopped short, visibly moved.

They instinctively felt that their aunt was in even greater anguish than the ambassador who found it so difficult to state his mission in plain terms.

"Is Aunt Rena ill?" asked Eric, with the desire to make it easy for him to go on.

"If she is ill,— if she wants us, Uncle Horace, we will go to her at once," added Mary, after a quick look into her brother's eyes.

Horace's face brightened. "You will?" he cried eagerly. "It is very good of you,— very. I can't tell you how much good it will do her to — to see you again. Of course,—" he hesitated once more —" of course, her heart is set on having you back there to — to stay."

Another protracted period of silence. Horace appeared to be reading their thoughts, for it was he who broke the silence.

"She *is* ill," he broke out despairingly. "Not physically ill, but mentally. Her soul is sick. She — she seems worse to-night than ever before. A dream,— a horrid dream this afternoon has upset her terribly. She refuses to go to bed to-night, fearing a repetition. I am unnerved. I couldn't endure it any longer. Your hearts would be touched if you could see her to-night. All evening long she has been wondering if you will ever come back. She knows that Chetwynd is dead. You see, she —"

Eric started. "She knows? Then,—"

"It came to her in the dream. And it was so very real, as she describes it." Horace arose stiffly. "I do not feel it is right for me to ask you to come with me now, but — but —"

"We'll go, Uncle Horace," said Mary resolutely. She knew that the decision rested with her.

Five minutes later, the three of them went forth into the night, huddled close together to fight the wind, with Mary in the centre. The clock in the Court-house struck the hour of ten.

"I will tell you of the dream when we reach the house," Mr. Blagden had said as they left the porch of the Verner cottage.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER THE SERMON

There was a vague, almost shadowy light in the parlour windows. A reflected glow from the dim old porch-lamp that hung above the front steps of the "Giant's Castle" threw the curtained windows into dull relief.

As the hurrying trio came up the gravel walk, their gaze was centered on one of these windows, held by a common anxiety. Not one, but all of them knew that a long-used chair stood close beside this particular window.

They were nearing the steps when one of the rigid curtains moved ever so slightly, and yet distinctly. It parted from its mate an inch or two and then became motionless once more. The effect was weird, uncanny, almost ghostly. Someone sat behind this curtain watching their approach; an unseen hand held the curtains apart; a pair of wistful eyes peered out of the loneliness that lay in the room behind.

Horace Blagden sighed audibly.

Once inside the door, he checked his companions with a whispered word and the raising of a finger to his lips. They stood there for a moment, listening.

"Go into the library," said he, in a lowered voice. "I think your aunt is in the parlour."

He crossed the hall and softly opened the door, pausing an instant before entering. As the door closed behind him, Eric and Mary turned toward the library, where a light gleamed through the transom.

"You will not tell them to-night?" whispered Mary, clutching his arm.

"No," he replied without hesitation, "I haven't the heart. Why, he seems happy — actually happy."

They waited in the old, familiar room, curiously awed by its Blagdenesque primness after their own rather unconventional disorder. Mary removed her hat and laid it on the table with her gossamer and gloves. It was an inspired act on her part, as subsequent events proved.

Mr. Blagden came in a few minutes later, holding open the door that his wife might pass before him. There was a contented smile on his thin lips.

"There, my dear," he said gently, waving his hand in the direction of the two Midthornes; "I am sure you can't call those fine flesh and blood creatures dream fancies. They are very real, and won't disappear before morning, as you say." To Eric and Mary: "Your aunt is positive she is only dreaming you are here."

A wavering, uncertain smile appeared on Mrs. Blagden's face. She advanced, holding out her hands, almost shyly.

The young people sprang forward, each grasping a slim white hand. Mary impulsively threw an arm about her aunt's shoulders and drew the thin, shrinking figure close to her strong, eager body. Then she kissed the tremulous lips of the woman who had done nothing in her life but hurt her.

"She's come to stay, Aunt Rena," said Eric.

Mrs. Blagden withdrew her hand from Eric's and slowly, gently passed it over the cheek of the girl. Her eyes were soft and imploring.

"Oh, my dear, dear Mary," she murmured, "are you quite sure that you meant to kiss me like that? Do you really mean to —"

Mary kissed her again. "I *do* mean it, Aunt Rena, I *do* mean it."

"I have been very unkind, very unjust to you," said Mrs. Blagden, still searching the girl's face with wondering eyes.

"I can forget, Aunt Rena," said Mary, quite simply. She did not commit the error of trying to appear definitely reconciled.

"I am sorry for all that I may have done, my dear," said her aunt humbly. "I can say no more. But,— but I *do* love you! I *do* want you!"

It was a wail from the very bottom of a hungry, unhappy soul — a soul that still belonged to the blithe, untrammelled Rena Van Dykeman of another day, and that now said good-bye forever to its Corinth environment.

"And you, too, Eric," she went on, more calmly. She eyed him fondly, and patted his arm. "You are my son now. I want a son. I need a son. Your uncle needs you."

"I do, indeed," spoke up Mr. Blagden, unsteadily. "Now, my dear, don't you think you'd better retire? You are very tired. It has been a hard day for you."

"It was very thoughtful of you, Mary, to take off your hat before I came in," said Mrs. Blagden irrelevantly, even as she laid her hand on her husband's arm. "It made it so easy for me. You will forgive me if I say good night now. Good night, Eric. You will find your rooms just as you left them. Martha has put out your things,— some that you forgot to take away with you. I've kept them in my bureau since — Yes,

yes, Horace, I am coming. Good night, Mary. I am so glad you have come back to us. Martha will call you as usual in the morning."

In the doorway, Horace turned to speak to the deeply moved young man and woman.

"Will you be good enough to wait here for a little while? I am coming down to close up the house." There was something significant in the way he put it. They were wet and uncomfortable, yet they would not have thought of going upstairs before their uncle laid bare the conditions which had sent him out into the night so bravely.

The change in Horace's nature was most strikingly illustrated by the next remark that fell from his lips.

"Oh, dear me, I almost forgot that you are wet and cold. Come upstairs to your rooms. Martha will get out dry stockings and slippers for you. And she shall make mustard baths for your feet before you go to bed. And hot lemonades."

When the Midthornes came downstairs later on, after changing a part of their apparel, they were amazed to find Horace Blagden on his knees before the fireplace, clumsily starting a fire in the grate. His lack of experience was evident, his embarrassment undisguised. Eric went to his assistance.

Presently they were seated before the snapping coals.

"Your aunt's dream," said Mr. Blagden, "was a most distressing one. It was so real that she can't get it out of her mind that we are to hear bad news of Chetwynd. You see, I mention his name once more. I do so because I am confident that he is not in the land of the living, Adam Carr to the contrary. Not a day passes that I do not expect to hear through that excellent blood-hound that my son has come to his death in some far-off land and that the chase has ended."

"But, Aunt Rena's dream, please," said Mary, with a quick glance at Eric's twitching face.

Horace moistened his dry lips with his tongue. "She was taking her nap this afternoon, as usual. A vision came to her. It was more than a dream. In this vision there appeared a series of vast cliffs and precipices, reaching so high in the sky that all the world seemed to lie below them. Far below, at the base of these dreadful cliffs, was the sea,— miles and miles below, she declares. The breakers came rushing up in the shape of gigantic hands and arms, all of them reaching upward in the effort to clamber to the top of the sheer walls of stone that touched the sky.

"She came out upon the loftiest of all these cliffs and sat down to rest, with her tired feet hanging over the ledge. The great arms and writhing fingers redoubled their efforts. They climbed higher and higher, but they could not reach to her feet. A huge, black-lipped mouth opened and closed, showing its teeth, in the sea below,— a vast maw that craved her as with an appetite that knew no pity. As she sat there, looking wearily about, almost at the gates of heaven, another figure appeared on the cliff not far away. It was Chetwynd. He approached to the very edge, and stood looking out over space, his hands on a flimsy railing she had not noticed before. She cried out to him and would have risen to go to him but for that strange paralysis that one experiences in dreams."

He paused to clear his throat. Eric drew a long, deep breath and relaxed his grip on the arm of the chair.

"Then she tried to call out to him, but no sound above a whisper could she force from her lips. Another figure came creeping up from behind, the figure of a man whose face she could not see. This man stole upon Chetwynd and struck him a violent blow, sending him through the rail and over the —"

Eric leaped to his feet, a cry of horror on his lips. Then, to the utter amazement of his uncle, he rushed from the room.

Mr. Blagden turned to Mary in great distress.

"Dear me," he said; "dear me! What have I said? I — Where are you going, Mary?"

"To Eric!" she cried, in great agitation. A moment later, Horace Blagden sat alone in his library, staring at the door, vastly perplexed, and with a great apprehension growing up in his heart.

He heard the rush of swift footsteps in the hall upstairs, the slamming of a door, and then no other sound save the merry crackle of the coals.

. . . .

Two days went slowly by. They brought forth an early apology from Eric for his rude behaviour in the library, but no explanation. He had decided to wait for the last word from Adam Carr. Not that he lacked the courage or the will to deliver his secret, but that newly made conditions raised obstacles that could not be surmounted. First of all, the pathetic devotion of his uncle and aunt. They called him their son! Then, the innate gentleness of his own nature, which shrank from the desire to rob them of their new estate,— a strange wealth of contentment and resignation. To tell them now would be to destroy the only joy left in life for them. Again, the curious sense of loyalty to Adam Carr!

He lost no time in looking up John Payson, to whom an explanation was due, and a plea for Mary's sake. Payson heard him through,— a nervous, disconnected statement it was,— and considerately assured him that he not only understood the situation, but that he would not have had Mary do otherwise than she had done.

"Tell her, Eric," he said, "that I love her more than ever. I can wait until she is ready to send for me. Brace up, old fellow. I understand."

But, though he said it fairly enough, he did not understand. He was sorely puzzled.

No word came from Adam Carr.

Sunday was at hand. The Saturday *Courier* had announced the programme for the services at the First Congregational Church. There was to be a solo in the morning by the popular Miss Smith, with flute and 'cello obligato! More wonderful still, a 'cello solo during the "collection" by the famous Professor Parker of Boston! In the evening, a song service, with a short sermon by the minister, the Rev. Mr. King.

And all this in the First Congregational Church of Corinth! Horace Blagden's church!

At half-past ten, Mr. Blagden put on his tall hat, took up his gold-headed cane, and announced to the two Midthornes that it was time to be off to church. Mrs. Blagden was not up to it, so they were leaving her behind.

"The bell hasn't rung yet, Uncle Horace," observed Eric, who had been waiting for the resounding peals of that well-known summoner of the faithful.

"Mr. King's orders, my dear boy," said Horace as calmly as if the silencing of that venerable and never-failing bell was the most trivial thing in the world. He pondered a moment and then added, with a queer little shake of his head: "Mr. King is really a human sort of a Christian. A sensible one, I might say. Come along, please. We can't afford to be late after what he said at the board meeting last week."

He seemed nervous and quite anxious to be off.

"You see, my dears, there's a very sick child across the street from the church. Abscesses in the ears, I understand. They've got tan bark along the entire block. Last week I attended to having the heavy teaming stopped on that part of the street. The child's mother informed Mr. King that the frightful clanging of the church bell almost set the little girl wild with pain. So,"— here he took a long breath,—" Mr. King promised her that — er, ahem! — it should not ring until the little sufferer was quite fully recovered. Most unusual. Most extraordinary. The bell hasn't missed a service, morning or night, in sixty years."

"Good for Mr. King!" cried Mary. "He is the right kind of a Christian. I don't see why the foolish old thing has to ring anyway."

Mr. Blagden looked hurt. "Really, Mary, that isn't just the proper —" He caught himself up with one of his rare smiles, albeit was rather a shamefaced effort. "Mr. King did not put it in just that way, my dear, but he was quite convincing and — er, ahem! — very positive. He said that if the members of the First Congregational Church did not know the hours for service, it was high time they were learning them. It isn't necessary to ring a bell in order to get people to the theatre on time, said he, so why bring them to church in that way. Really, he was quite emphatic about it. Somehow, we agreed with him. I believe it is his intention to make note of the tardy ones to-day, for — er, ahem! — missionary purposes, as he put it to the board."

Mr. Blagden looked at his watch, and accelerated his speed quite noticeably. Eric and Mary could scarcely credit their senses. Truly, a wonderful thing had happened in Corinth. A new gospel had supplanted the old. A rock-bound, half-dead Spirituality had been shaken into life by a process of enlightenment that was positively bewildering. An up-to-date minister, with an up-to-date gospel, had completely upset the religious calculations of a century and a half, and Corinth was surviving the shock!

Eric could not help wondering how long it would be before one of the great, progressive and covetous metropolitan congregations would extend a call to this amazing Mr. King — and get him at a vastly increased salary, with perhaps a pension for his wife when he became too old to preach, or it got tired of him and wanted a change.

The new Congregationalism had at last forced its way into Corinth. It had taken many years. I venture the opinion that the First Congregational Church did more toward proving the blindness of faith when it called Mr. King than anything that has been done in the name or the history of religion. A congregation so settled and steadfast in its ways could not have accomplished a transition so complete as this except by accident. Mr. King was truly an accident, quite as much of an accident as the stroke of lightning which never strikes twice in the same place. If anyone had told the trustees in advance that he was going to tweak tradition's nose until it slipped entirely out of joint, those excellent gentlemen, Horace Blagden included, would have preserved the tenets of the church so rigorously that the name of Mr. Percival King would never have been heard in Corinth. But they took him on faith, and they had been taking him on faith ever since, without a murmur of dissent.

He was the modern Congregationalist (God bless him!), and as strong as Samson when it came to shattering pillars. The old church fell down about their heads, without hurting anyone, and a new one went up in its place so swiftly that before the congregation knew what it was about it was reformed, rejuvenated, humanised. He was giving it something to think about, something to enjoy, something to grasp.

Unlike Mr. Presbrey and his sombre predecessors, he called a spade a spade, and with that spade he dug a very deep grave for bigotry, winsomely engaging a whole church-full of unconscious bigots to assist him in burying the dead.

The silencing of the bell! Violins, flutes and 'cellos, — without the brass and cymbals,— in the choir! Joyous, inspiring anthems! Twenty minute sermons and cheerful texts! Oratory without thirdlies, and fourthlies, and ninthlies! Golf on week days and a genuine interest in the Sunday-school nine! Potted plants in the vestibule and fresh posies on the reading stand! Broiled lobster instead of fried chicken,— when he could get it! Man alive!

And congregations at both services on the Sabbath that tried the capacity of the building! And, most wonderful of all: if the regular pew-holders were not in their seats by five minutes after eleven, the busy ushers were instructed to conduct the standing overflow that lined the walls to the *cushioned* pews of the tardy!

A long way back in this narrative I said that Mr. Presbrey was a good man and that he would bear watching. The proof is at hand. He has become a bookagent. A side-issue, of course. His preparatory school for boys was not what you would call self-sustaining. So, if you didn't have boys to send to him, you could do the next best thing by subscribing for that enlightening set of books known as "The Great Masters of the Pulpit," twelve volumes, calf or cloth, with gilt edges and copper-plate portraits, at two-and-a-half or four, just as your fancy for covers ran, five dollars down and the balance in weekly installments. Your name on the subscription list was always solicited because its presence there was an asset not to be despised in the effort to introduce the books into all respectable and intellectual homes. It was particularly desired that you be among those at the top of the list. If your name was there, everyone else in town was sure to know that the books were well worth possessing. No home should be without "The Great Masters of the Pulpit." You felt rather sorry for Mr. Presbrey, so you subscribed — for the two-and-a-half set. He was so successful in the placing of these books in Corinth and nearby villages that, after a month's trial at the work, he felt encouraged to add Dickens and Thackeray and Shakespere to his stock. But not Balzac or Gautier. It was much too early for the effort to introduce those French masters into the homes of the Corinthians. The Rev. Mr. King had not been there long enough.

Mr. Blagden led the way down the aisle to the pew that once had belonged to his great-grandfather. The name in the corner of the seat had never been changed. The word "Blagden" was there, just as it had been ordered by the far-sighted and thrifty ancestor, whose penuriousness took in the probability that some future

Blagden might aspire to different initials; moreover, it was ridiculous to expect that the first-born male in each generation would have to be named So-and-So, simply because of loyalty to a church-pew.

It is not the purpose or the desire of the writer to devote a chapter to the description of this spring morning service in the First Congregational Church of Corinth. We will merely glance over the congregation, absorb a few stray words from the lips of the pastor, commend the music, and be back on our way to the house on the hill, vaguely satisfied with the new Corinthian era.

We find the church filled to overflowing. Not one of the old pew-holders is absent. Each and every one got there on time without being called by the bell. In fact, a goodly number were there ahead of time. There was in each breast the ever-impending dread that some brash outsider would sneak in and confiscate his seat. And it's a very awkward matter, getting one out of your pew after he's once got into it. You can't do it without words, and the other fellow is quite apt to have something to say about it himself.

Very stiff and erect sat Mr. Blagden, looking neither to right nor left, but straight at the fervid, impassioned, convincing face of the young minister who had wrought so many changes. No man dozed,— never! The spell was upon all those within the sound of his voice. In the old days one might have been supported in the belief that Mr. Presbrey's hearers regarded the passive mood as the only true channel through which to absorb sanctification: hence, they slept. But young Mr. King, soulful and forceful, had them in his grip. They just *couldn't* sleep. He was fighting Satan in a practical, twentieth century way; not allegorically.

His sermon on this eventful morning had to do with "Hell." He spoke of the modern, up-to-date hell, the sort that we see every day of our lives if we take the trouble to look about us. It was somewhat of a new idea to the people of Corinth. They had come to believe that hell was a long way off. Mr. King made it uncomfortably near for those who listened.

Here are a few of the surprising things that filtered into the ears of the Corinthians and gave them something to think about for days.

"Christianity is a science, and we've got to treat it as such. It isn't a theory. . . . You can't conquer sin by sneering at it. . . . Everything else in the world is going ahead; the church isn't. . . . The Salvation Army and the Y. M. C. A. know how to fight. They know where to hit and how to hit. . . . You can't pat the devil on the back all week and call him 'old chap,' and then turn around and surprise him by trying to thrash him on the Sabbath. . . . We have one day of rest in the seven. He never takes a day off. . . . If you expect to defeat the Black Prince, you've got to come out of your shells and fight in the open. You'll have the advantage of him there. . . . The world is very large and very clever. Fossils and mossbacks have no more license for thinking they can fight the world than an octogenarian has for thinking he can fight a youth of twenty-five. That's why, my friends, the church is going around part of the time with a black eye and a grudge. And it is always whining when it gets thrashed. . . . It only fights the devil on Sunday, and then gives him a week to recuperate. And, my friends, his Satanic Majesty doesn't care the snap of his finger for all the Sundays we can crowd into Eternity. It's the week days that he's interested in. . . . Fight the devil with love, not bitterness of spirit. He can't find a defence against love. If you try to fight him with scorn as the weapon, you'll get mightily beaten. He has too many friends who resent being sneered at, — and they're influential, too. . . . I have a great deal of respect for the sincere atheist or agnostic. I like a man who is sincere. The atheist is never anything less than he pretends to be. You can't say as much for the great majority of our professed Christians. Give me a fair-and-square, upright atheist every day in preference to a weak-kneed professing Christian who doesn't stand for anything after he's paid his pew rent and added a half-dollar or so of a Sunday to pay for his week's salvation. . . . The atheist is a man; the wish-washy, half-hearted, sceptical Christian isn't good enough to black his boots. . . . You can't get into heaven by paying fifty cents a week on the installment plan. Why, the way things go in these days, it costs a great deal more than that to get into the other place. . . . A man who spends a thousand dollars a week having a 'devil of a time,' my friends, can't balance his account with God for fifty cents or a dollar. . . . Frock coats and black ties don't make Christians of you. Overalls and jumpers will do quite as well. No matter which you wear, you will have to lay them aside when you start forth to face your Maker. . . . You may come to this church in your every-day, business suits if you choose. As a matter of fact, I believe it to be easier to preach salvation to a man in his grey sack suit than it is to try to get at him when he's got on his black regimentals. . . . I wear this long black coat because it is, in a sense, the official robe of my great office. I respect it, but it doesn't make a Christian of me any more than it makes one of the undertaker. I witnessed a negro minstrel parade not long ago. All told, there were more than forty Prince Albert coats in that procession. But those fellows didn't look like preachers. So, you see, it isn't a question of clothes. . . . I believe we'd all feel better for it if we stuck a small, fragrant nosegay in the lapels of our coats next Sunday, just to prove to ourselves that church-going is a joyous, not a grim undertaking. . . . I do not like to see a man singing Hallelujah with a long and a doleful face. Sing it gladly! That's what it means."

At the conclusion of the twenty-five minute sermon, and while the congregation was fairly shouting the rare old hymn, Eric drew a long breath and looked about him as if suddenly aroused from a sort of stupor. He had listened in frank astonishment during the first part of the sermon; toward the end he allowed himself to be carried away by the earnestness of the young minister. He was disappointed when the extraordinary discourse came to an end. He wanted more. Here was a man with a gospel so broad, and convincing, and brave that his heart warmed toward him at once. This was not the stern gospel that Mr. Presbrey had fairly jammed down his throat in the old days. He had the feeling that he was going to like Mr. King as a man, as a friend, as a brother. It would be quite impossible to ever look upon him as a relentless arbiter who prodded one with texts and dogmas until the soul sickened. No; this man's religion smiled: he would have a warm hand-clasp.

"I'll bet he's a fine chap," whispered Eric in Mary's ear. She nodded her head, but frowned slightly in the fear that his very worldly estimate of the minister might have reached the ears of Mr. Blagden.

Out of the corners of their eyes they glanced at their uncle's face. It was beaming; it was rapt.

"Wonders have been performed," murmured Eric. Then, this quaint thought found expression in a whispered: "You *can* teach an old dog new tricks, after all."

An old habit moved him. His gaze wandered, as it had done on countless Sundays in other times, to the pew in which Joan Bright and her father always sat.

At the same instant, one of the occupants of that pew turned to look directly into his eyes.

Joan Bright was there. For one long, hazy minute they looked at each other. Then a slow, even curious smile crept into her face. She nodded her head. He was too amazed, too dazed to respond to her greeting at once. She looked away before he could shake off the spell of a possible illusion.

Strangely enough, his interest in the service was gone. During the prayer and the benediction he did not take his eyes from the half-averted, serene face of the girl across the church. It was not until the service came to a close that his mind grasped the fact that she stood beside a tall, handsome young man, who held the hymn-book with her, while Judge Bright stood detached and apart.

With the final "amen," he hurriedly left the seat, after a quick apology to his uncle, and elbowed his way through the crowd, bent on reaching the door ahead of her.

If he had paused to look at Mary, he would have seen the wave of red that spread over her cheek, and the curious narrowing of her eyes. She had been aware of Joan's presence from the moment that young woman entered the church.

Just as he reached the vestibule, with craning neck and eager eyes, a hand was laid on his arm.

"She came out of the other door, Eric, to avoid the crowd, I fancy," said the owner of the hand. "She's getting into young Sallonsby's automobile now. Funny how times have changed. People used to think it wrong to go to church in a carriage when I was a —"

"So it's you, is it?" demanded Eric harshly.

Joan was entering the big red car at the curb. She did not look back. His eyes were upon her. He had not glanced at the man who volunteered the information. He knew without looking.

"Yes," said Adam Carr. Then he added whimsically: "It's always me. Come along with me. Don't wait for your uncle. I have news for you."

Eric, grievously disturbed by Joan's behavior, suffered himself to be led down the steps. At the bottom, he turned to his old friend with a sudden anger that must have attracted the attention of those near at hand.

"I suppose you've had news that he died, just as you said he would."

Adam did not respond to the angry sarcasm until they were clear of the crowd.

"No," he said. "I have come to notify your uncle that I've given up the chase."

"By heaven, it's high time!" cried Eric.

"And to admit that I've been on the wrong track all the time. The fellow I've been chasing all these years turns out not to be Chetwynd at all."

Eric stared. "What is your game now?"

"Simply this. I'm going to let you shoulder the whole business. I know nothing whatever about the affair on the bridge or what transpired afterward."

"You mean that you are going to let me get out of it as best I can?" cried Eric, amazed.

"Let us cross the street. Too crowded on this side. Fine preacher, that. He's making Christians just as they make sardines — I mean, he's packing 'em in the same way."

Once across the street, he resumed the original theme. "My boy, I've come to the conclusion that it's best for you to tell your uncle that you killed Chetwynd. No court of justice can convict you of the crime, however. The *corpus delicti* must be established. In other words, the state is obliged to produce the body of the victim in order to prove that he is truly and legally deceased. There must be something besides verbal testimony to show that the man is dead. Technicalities are great life-savers. I once knew of a case in Chicago where a man was sent up for life for murdering his wife. The state was required to prove the *corpus delicti.* It produced one of the metatarsal bones and said it was a part of the dead woman's corporeal body, although some of the experts declared it to be from the person of a pig. But the jury decided it was a part of the woman, and convicted the prisoner. If it hadn't been for that tiny bone he would have gone scot-free. So, in your case, there's got to be something to show that Chetwynd is really dead."

"But I will swear that I killed him," said Eric sharply.

"You wouldn't have anything to say about it," said Adam Carr cheerfully. "Your lawyer would see to that. *He* would demand the exhibits, from a to z, among them Chetwynd or a part of him. What's a lawyer for if not to attend to such things as that?"

"Is that what you came here to tell me?" demanded Eric.

"That, and this: I can't afford to be dragged into this thing. It means ruin, degradation. I merely ask you to assume the entire responsibility. Leave me out of it altogether. No one need be the wiser."

"I see," said Eric thoughtfully. They walked along for some distance in silence. Adam was watching his friend out of the corner of his eye.

At the corner below, Eric drew up sharply.

"You're justified in asking this of me, Mr. Adam," he said, knitting his brows. "You have stood by me, right or wrong. I am not so ungrateful that I will drag you down,— ruin you, as you say. I won't say that I condone or approve the uses to which you have put this unhappy business but that is neither here nor there. If you ask it of me, I will tell my story without connecting you with it in any way whatsoever. Here's my hand on it. I've tried to dislike you, but I find that I can't."

Adam Carr's face glowed. He uttered a little cry of relief as he clasped the young man's hand.

"That's all I wanted, my lad," he said briskly. "I wanted to see if you were true blue, so far as your friends are concerned. I didn't believe you could go back on me, after you saw what it meant to me. You would have told long ago but for me. Perhaps you don't realise it, but you would have told everything the other day if you hadn't felt that it would be doing me a grave injustice. Well, I know it if you don't. We've stood together all these years, my boy, and we'll stand together now. You've got something to confess to Horace, and so have I. My crime is ten thousand times darker than yours. It isn't conscience that's working on me, but just plain fatigue. I'm sick and tired of playing with Horace. I don't sleep of nights. It's got on my nerves. So, if you don't mind, we'll face him together — this afternoon."

Eric was trembling all over. "Do you really mean it, Mr. Adam?" he cried.

"I do. And we'll not put off till to-morrow what we can do to-day."

In a maze of wonder, Eric walked on beside this strange, amazing man. The thought never entered his head that Adam Carr, the most astute and calculating of men, might have conceived the idea that his own safety lay in the powerful effect Eric's candour would have on Horace Blagden. This is not saying that Carr secretly cherished a conviction of that sort, but that he was clever enough to profit by the perfectly obvious conclusion.

"And by the way," said Adam, with a speculative chuckle, "if I'm any judge of human nature,— and I profess to be,— I think we'll find Miss Bright on the right side of the fence when she sees you are in trouble. It's a way women have."

CHAPTER XIX

TRUTHS AND LIES

On the church steps, Mr. Blagden looked here and there in quest of his nephew. He had stopped inside to shake the hand of the engaging young minister, and to compare notes with half-a-dozen rock-ribbed deacons. Eric and Adam Carr were far on their way down the street when he emerged with Mary.

She had seen the two men, however, and was filled with misgivings. She fell into the natural error of suspecting that her brother had hastened away to meet Adam Carr, whereas her first thoughts attributed his hasty departure to a desire to accost Joan Bright.

Her heart rankled. Joan had looked past her during service without so much as the pretence of smile or nod. Mary's sensitive, high-strung nature rebelled against this exhibition of intolerance on the part of her old-time friend and playmate. While Eric was squirming in the seat, eager to be off, Mary was resentfully digging up the memory of Joan's first sign of coldness and disfavour, which was followed later on by the cut direct. It all came about after an all-night automobile trip, she recalled, when she had taken an up-state trip in company with Jack Payson and a couple of friends from New York. It was of no consequence to the gossips, who told the tale, that Mr. and Mrs. Bates were in the party. What hurt Mary most, even though she was loth to admit it to herself, was the conviction that, next to Eric and Payson, she still loved Joan Bright better than anyone else in the world. Therefore, she was privileged to hate her with particular unreasonableness.

"Where is Eric, my dear?" asked her uncle, peering about in all directions.

She could not conceal her nervousness. "I think he hurried out to see Joan Bright. She's back from the South, Uncle."

"Indeed. She wasn't expected so soon. Why did she change her plans so hastily?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Haven't you —"

"No, I haven't seen her," interrupted Mary, answering the perfectly obvious question before it could be uttered.

Mr. Blagden hemmed rather awkwardly. "Probably came in last night," he vouchsafed. "I daresay Eric is walking home with her. We shan't see him until — Ah, how do you do, Presbrey. Splendid sermon, wasn't it? Good morning, Julia."

The Presbreys, transversing the opposite way, acknowledged the greeting with a most ceremonious bow. It did not occur to them to inform Mr. Blagden that they had listened to the sermon in the Second Congregational Church.

"A most admirable discourse," said Mr. Presbrey blandly.

"Scholarly," said his wife, as she bestowed her sweetest smile on Mary. "So you are back, are you, my dear?"

"Yes, Mrs. Presbrey," said Mary, also smiling sweetly.

Then their ways diverged.

A little later, Mary awoke to the fact that her uncle was speaking, not so much to her as to the world in general.

"Yes, I am sorry for Presbrey. I suppose he realises what an old fogy he was toward the end. Still he was — I should say he *is* a good Christ-like man. He can't have any bitterness of heart, although I daresay he — er, ahem! deplores the fact that this new broom is sweeping so thoroughly. Dear me, *he* never saw a congregation so vast as — but what am I saying? Yes, yes, I am sorry for Presbrey. I don't mind saying to you, Mary, that he has been on my conscience not a little during the past few months. I can't help feeling that I took a rather unfair advantage of him at the time of —"

"Nonsense!" broke in Mary. "It was a fair fight between you, Uncle Horace."

"A fair fight, my dear? Fight?" said Mr. Blagden, with a stare.

"And he began it," she added succinctly.

Mr. Blagden cleared his throat. "Be that as it may," he said hastily, "I feel that I owe him some form of reparation. I have quite fully decided to put him in charge of the new library."

Eric and Adam had turned a distant corner. Mary breathed freely again.

"The new library?" she repeated.

Horace affected a dry chuckle. "You'll see it all in to-morrow's *Courier*," he said. "Eric's to build it. The handsomest structure outside of Boston, if I do say it."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Uncle Horace."

"Of course you don't. I am to talk it over with Eric in the morning. The *Courier* is now in full possession of the details."

The eager, excited questions that rose to her lips were left unuttered. John Payson approached from the opposite direction. Mary's heart gave a great, wild throb, and then seemed to stop beating entirely. Her face was very pale.

Payson did not pause, but went by with a warm smile for her and a polite bow for Horace Blagden. The smile she gave in return was a wavering, pathetic effort that went straight to his heart. He glanced back over his shoulder, and was disappointed because she continued to look rigidly ahead instead of turning as he had done.

"Wasn't that young Payson?" demanded Horace, his jaw setting hard.

"Yes, Uncle Horace," she replied in a low voice.

Silence fell between them, a chill silence that voiced their thoughts as plainly as spoken words. She cast a covert look at the stern face of her uncle. A flush was in his cheek. A moment later, he turned his head slightly for a brief glance at the girl's profile. Her eyes were lowered. She was staring miserably at the brick sidewalk which they traversed so evenly, so steadily.

Horace's lips seemed to tighten. The veins in his thin grey temples stood out like cords. Suddenly he relaxed; his stiff shoulders sagged; a queer smile forced its way out of the hard, set lines about his mouth, and his eyes grew wistful. His lips parted twice in the effort to utter words that came up from his heart, words he hated, yet longed to utter, for he knew they would give happiness to her. Something tightened in his throat. He cast an involuntary glance over his shoulder. A shadow crossed his face, dispelled an instant later by a conquering smile.

"Mary, my child," he said gently, "I think, if you don't mind, I will drop in at Mr. Briscoe's for a few minutes. He is down with rheumatism. I — But, wait; I will be perfectly frank with you. John Payson is standing at the corner back there, looking at you as if — well, I fancy if I were to efface myself, he would not be long in taking my place at your side. I believe I'll make the experiment."

Mary's wonder changed to joy. Her face was suddenly as radiant as the sunshine which fell about them.

"Why,— why, Uncle Horace," she began breathlessly.

He laid his hand on the gate leading to the rheumatic Mr. Briscoe's lawn.

"Try the experiment yourself, my dear," he said with a smile. "I will stroll home alone, after I've cheered poor old Briscoe up a bit."

She stood at the gate, watching his rather swift progress up the gravel walk.

"I wonder —" she murmured, half aloud, and then turned her eager face in the direction of the corner above. She forgot Eric and Adam Carr and the sinking feeling she had experienced on seeing them together not five minutes before. There is something immeasurably selfish in young love.

Jack Payson came striding toward her. Perhaps, from a window in the Briscoe house, Horace saw them meet and move off together, down the street.

An hour later, she said good-bye to her lover at the gate and hurried up the walk toward the suddenly attractive portals of "The Giant's Castle." There was a gladness, a brightness in her eyes; a song in her heart. Somehow the world was brighter, the sun was warmer, the buds on the trees were greener than they had ever been before. She tripped up the steps and fairly danced across the porch. There was in her mind a great resolve to do something she had never done before: to put her arms about her uncle's neck and kiss him, not once, but many times.

She paused for a moment just outside the library door, to compose herself. As she stood there, breathing quickly, the curious stillness she had noticed on entering the house became more pronounced. She recalled, with a shudder, having been in a house once where a dead woman was lying upstairs in the winding sheet. The utter stillness of that well-remembered house was not unlike this that now closed in about her, smothering the joy that so lately radiated from her warm, throbbing heart.

Half in fear, she laid her hand on the knob of the library door. A moment passed before she turned it. The sense of impending disaster increased with each second of delay. What had happened? Who in the house was dead?

The door opened quietly, slowly, and she looked into the partially darkened room. No voice called out a welcome to her.

The shade in the big front window was high; that end of the room was flooded with sunlight. Her eyes were slow to take in the details of the picture that lay before her. So immovable, so still were the four figures that made up the tableau that she could think of them only as statues.

First, and naturally, her gaze fell upon the square, thick-set figure in the window. Adam Carr was standing there, his back to the room, his hands clasped behind him, staring at the porch through the white lace curtains. It was as if he had turned his back upon a particularly harrowing scene.

Eric leaned against the mantelpiece, his chin lowered, his arms folded across his breast,— the picture of utter dejection. On the sofa before him sat his uncle and aunt, the former stiffly upright and tense, the latter drooping limply against him, her hands covering her eyes.

It was all over. Eric had confessed! The blow had fallen.

After what seemed an interminable length of time, her brother lifted his eyes and saw her standing there, stunned, irresolute. He stared for a moment with haggard eyes, and then let his arms drop limply to his side. The act was in itself an acknowledgment of potent despair. Then, with a movement of his head, he directed her to attend the stricken pair on the sofa.

As she glided across the room, Adam Carr turned from the window and swiftly left the room, without so much as a glance at the four persons who were left to play out the drama. With deliberate intent, he banged the library door in closing it. The shock served its purpose. It broke the spell.

With infinite gentleness, Mary drew Mrs. Blagden's stiff, cold hands away from her face and held them close to her own warm, heaving breast. Mrs. Blagden stared blankly, even wonderingly at the face of the girl. The white, drawn lips moved in a voiceless question.

"They know everything," came in hoarse tones from Eric.

The tears sprang to Mary's eyes. Through the mist that blinded them, they asked the great, important question of him.

"How can I ask them to forgive me?" he groaned, and that was his answer to the question that lay in her eyes.

Mrs. Blagden's lips parted. A dead, lifeless voice uttered these words:

"Let me be alone with you, Horace. Let me die with your arms about me."

Then it was that Horace relaxed. His strong gaze wavered. A great shudder ran over his frame.

"There is nothing more to be said," fell clearly, mechanically from his lips. His eyes were upon the white face of his nephew. "We know all there is to know. It is all over. The truth at last." His voice rose to a sort of wail. "I — I can't understand why you have allowed us to suffer all these years, Eric, when one word from you would have ended our misery, our uncertainty, our — our endless waiting. See! See what it has cost us!"

"God forgive me!" groaned Eric, burying his face in the arm that now rested on the mantel.

With an effort, Horace struggled to his feet. Slowly he crossed over to the young man's side, towering above the bent, shaking figure. After a moment's hesitation, he laid his hand on Eric's shoulder. His nephew cringed.

"Give me time," he began, but went back to correct himself, revealing the new phase that marked his manner in these days. "Give us time, Eric. It is hard to take all this in at once. We must work it out for ourselves and by ourselves. Just your aunt and I. When the shock has worn off." He was speaking jerkily, brokenly, as if the effort to control himself was trying his every power. "We do not want to be harsh, or unjust, Eric. We shall seek —"

Eric looked up, amazed. "Harsh? Unjust?" he said bitterly. "Why, I've forfeited all claim to —"

"Hush, my boy," said Mr. Blagden. "Give us time,— give us time."

Mary, in the intensity of a great emotion, cried out shrilly: "He didn't mean to — to kill him, Uncle. You know he did not mean —"

Mrs. Blagden shook herself free and turned on the girl. There was a wild, insane glare in her eyes.

"He threatened Chetwynd a hundred times," she said harshly. "A hundred times! He hated him! He wanted to kill him!"

"My dear, my dear!" pleaded Horace. "Calm yourself. Let us judge this poor boy as God will judge him. Remember, we called him our son but yesterday."

"I cannot — I cannot forgive," moaned his wife, falling back limply. "Don't touch me — now!" she cried out to the girl, who would have caught her in her arms. Mary shrank back, repulsed.

A full minute passed, fraught with tragic misery. Eric was the first to speak.

"I have told you everything. Adam Carr has supported my story. If you think he would lie to save me or himself —"

"No," said Horace grimly, "Adam Carr would not lie. He hates me too well to lie to me. The truth always hurts worse than a lie, and he knows it. I believe you, Eric. You have never been anything but honest. It isn't that. It's the other thing. The long years we've been allowed to suffer."

"You would have sent me to the gallows if you had known all this five years ago," said Eric drearily. "Everything was different five years ago. *You* were different. You would have had no mercy, no pity in those days."

"You think I've changed? You were not afraid to risk confession to-day. Is that it?"

"No, no," cried Eric hastily. "I don't mean that. But I was afraid at the time. Afterwards it was too late. I — but I've said all this before. Why go over it again. I am the confessed slayer of your son, my own cousin. Now I ask to be given a fair trial, a just hearing. That's all."

Mr. Blagden said nothing for a few moments. He was studying the young man's face.

"You came out with the truth because you were sorry for us," he said at last. "Because you wanted to end our suffering and suspense?"

"Yes," said Eric. "I could have gone forever without telling if I had so desired."

"And you were not afraid that some day Adam Carr would betray you? You have never felt that he had a weapon to hold over you and to strike if he saw fit, to suit purposes of his own?"

Eric hesitated. "No, I've never really been afraid of Adam Carr. If I had been afraid of him I should never have come to you with the truth. He *did* hold it over my head, but,— well, here I am, sir. I was not afraid of him."

"It had to do with Mary and John Payson?"

"Yes. I will be frank."

"You told us the truth because you were sorry for us — because —" His voice faltered. "Because you loved us after all and could not let it go on any longer?"

"Yes."

"Conscience had nothing to do with it? The fear of God was not in your heart?"

Eric did not hesitate. "No. My conscience, so far as the death of Chetwynd is concerned, is clear. I had no fear of God, for God was *my* witness."

Mr. Blagden again laid his hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"Is it love or pity?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Eric was honest. He looked squarely into his uncle's eyes.

"I don't know, sir. I can't explain. I used to hate you and Aunt Rena. I do not hate you now. Somehow, I have changed."

"Somehow, *we* have changed," said Horace, correcting him. "We should not have expected you to love us, when, God forgive me for saying it,— when our own son did not love us. Do not interrupt. If he had loved us he would not be where he is to-day. My boy, I will not say to you now that I forgive you. It is not yet in my heart to do so. I must have it all out with myself, with God as my counsellor. You took the life of my son. You — Rena, I beg of you!"

Mrs. Blagden had risen, and stood wavering before the two men, on the verge of utter collapse. She put out her hand and touched her husband's arm.

"I want to be alone with you, Horace. Will you come?" she said dully.

"Yes, yes," he cried, putting his arm around her shoulders. "We will go, we will go, my dear."

"Wait," she said. Then she turned directly to Eric. "Eric, you should not have let your uncle suffer all these years. It was cruel of you to —"

"Come, come, my dear," broke in Mr. Blagden, unsteadily. "You were the great sufferer. I — I was going about among men all the time. You sat here alone and — my God! How long the years have been! My dear, my dear! How long we have waited together, you and I!"

He broke down completely. With the frail form of his wife clasped tightly to his breast, he lowered his head until his face was buried in the silken white hair.

Eric's lips moved in a mute appeal; his hands went out toward them and then fell to his sides. With a dry, racking sob in his throat, he turned away, staggering blindly toward the window. Mary came up with him quickly. She slipped her arm about his shoulders and whispered words of comfort and hope.

The shuffling of unsteady, dragging feet drew their visual attention once more to the pair at the other end of the room. Mr. Blagden had started to leave the library; he was making his way toward the door with the bent figure of his wife at his side, his arm about her waist for support. The old man's head was held high and his eyes were set.

Eric sprang forward to assist him, but was waved aside. Humbly the young man walked before them and opened the door for them to pass out into the hall.

"I can almost see the struggle on the bridge," said Horace, addressing no one in particular. "It appears to me as if in a vision. I can see Chetwynd hurling the stone at Eric, and the savage attack that came after. I can hear the things he was saying of Mary,— those brutal, vicious things. The fight was fair. God called my boy to the judgment bar. It was his time to go. It was not an accident. It was God's will. No human agency could have checked the will of God —"

A man was standing near the hat-rack in the hall. Eric stared, unbelieving.

Mr. Blagden's gaze rested for a moment on the motionless figure. Then his long, thin arm was raised; a quivering hand pointed toward the door leading to the porch.

"Leave my house!"

Adam Carr did not move. "I just wanted to say —" he began.

"Go!"

"I can't go until I have said —"

"Go, I say!" Horace's voice shook with suppressed fury.

"— until I have said that I am sorry to have been the cause of so much anguish to your wife, toward whom I have had no feeling," persisted Adam patiently. "I am sorry for what I've done to her. My grudge was against you."

"Hard as flint," fell from Horace's twisted lips.

"To strike fire from flint," was the other's sharp retort.

"You have not found me so hard as you suspected," said Horace slowly. "Not hard enough to give out fire when you strike in these days."

"Nor am I so hard, Horace Blagden," said Adam, for the first time revealing a sign of nervousness. "Well, I'll go now. If you need me, Eric, I'll be ready. A black Sunday."

"You have failed there," cried Horace, a thrill in his voice almost of triumph. "It is a bright Sunday. We see the light for the first time in years. Go, sir. Eric will not need you. We shall ask no favours of you, Adam Carr."

Carr allowed his gaze to rest on the face of Mrs. Blagden for an instant. She was regarding him with unspeakable loathing in her eyes; the crushed, beaten spirit was answering the call of pride. He opened his lips to speak his last word to her, met the look in her eyes, bowed awkwardly, and strode from the house without uttering another syllable.

"I cannot turn the other cheek to him,—I cannot," grated Horace. "'Love your enemy as yourself!' Bah! Puerile nonsense!"

Brother and sister watched them ascend the stairs and return down the hall. A moment later a door above was gently closed.

"Did you hear what he said?" asked Mary, in a half-whisper. "He said 'Eric will not need you!' Oh, Errie, Errie, he means to be kind, he means to be just."

Eric groaned. "Kind! Just! After what I've done for him."

She spoke eagerly. "He realises that he has not always been kind or just to you. He —"

"See here, Mary, you don't know all that happened in there before you came. He cursed me at first. He called me a murderer. He laughed when I said that I was ready and willing to give myself up to the law. He said there was no law that could punish me sufficiently. The change of front came after all this. Oh, I know how he feels — how he feels in his heart. He —"

"That was madness, fury," she cried. "He couldn't help it. He was beside himself. Now he is beginning to see clearly. He is a fair man."

"Just the same, I told him I was going to give myself up to the law and stand trial. I —"

She cried out piteously. "You must not do that! You shall not!"

"It isn't for Uncle Horace alone to acquit me of manslaughter. That's what Adam says the charge will be. The court must do it. And, listen: if I wait for Uncle Horace to file the affidavit against me, if I wait for him to bring me into court, it will never come to pass. He won't do it. It will be his turn to punish me. He will sit back and let the charge hang over me for years, just as I have done by him in a different way. Oh, I know him! He doesn't forgive so readily. He has Adam Carr and me just where he wants us. *And he'll be content to let us wait, just as he has waited.*"

"I am sure you are wrong. He will do one of two things. He will bring charges against you, or he will openly exonerate you. He will issue a statement, mark my words."

"Besides," went on Eric, knitting his brows in thought, "if I want to be brought to trial and legally acquitted of crime, I must not put him in the false position of complaining against me if he really means to acquit me in his own mind and heart. I must do it all myself. He may not aid in the prosecution, there is that much to be said. But if I don't give myself up, the state's attorney will force him to take action. It's got to come, so I might as well shoulder the whole of it and let Uncle Horace out of an unpleasant job."

Her protests were of no avail. He announced his intention to deliver himself up to the sheriff the next morning.

"It's a bailable offence," he said. "Adam Carr says I will not have to go to gaol if I have a bondsman ready. I am sure I will have no difficulty in getting —"

"What will Joan say when she hears of all this?" cried the unhappy girl, falling back on resources she would have despised an hour ago.

He closed his eyes, as if in pain. "I wonder if what Adam said will turn out to be true."

The remark would have puzzled her at another time. Now she passed it over without comment. A new thought had occurred to her.

"You must go to Jack. Tell everything to him. He will help you. He is strong and —"

"I could have told him yesterday," he said, "but not to-day. It's too late now."

Martha, the life-long servant in the house, was coming down the stairs.

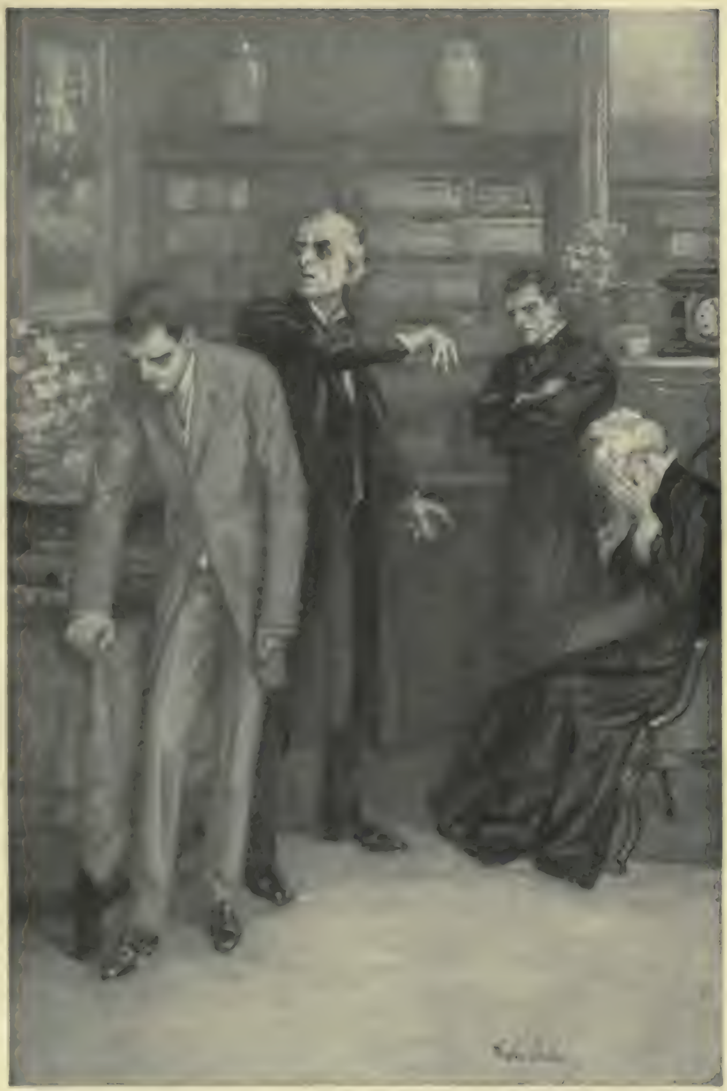
"Dinner's been waiting nearly an hour, Miss Mary," she said peevishly. "Everything's spoilt, and it's Sunday, too. I knocked on their door twice, but Mr. Horace says, without opening, to never mind, they won't be down, but for you young folks to go on eating. Do hurry. Belinda's mad as she c'n be. I don't blame her either. It's terrible for a cook — and an Irish cook at that — to be — Why, Mr. Eric, you surely can't be going out now!"

Eric had grabbed up his hat,— an old slouch hat instead of the tall silk one he had worn to church,— and was striding toward the porch.

"I can't eat anything,— I'm not hungry," he stammered distractedly. "I'm going out for a while, Mary. Stay around close, please, and see that — that everything's all right upstairs."

"Ain't nobody going to eat —" began Martha, almost in a state of collapse.

He was flying down the steps and across the lawn, leaving Mary in the doorway looking after him with troubled, uneasy eyes. She saw him vault the wall and make off in the direction of Jabez Carr's cottage. After a moment she turned to Martha.



"He cursed me at first. He called me a murderer."
(Page 360)

"I shan't disappoint you, Martha. I'm hungry. Come along."

That was always the way with Mary. She was a philosopher. She was content to leave everything to Providence — or luck? Meanwhile, she *was* hungry.

Her brother made straight for old Jabe's cottage. Somehow, he felt in need of an *old* friend — one who could lie to him joyously. He suddenly was longing for the vainglorious lies that had charmed his boyhood fancy, even though he knew them to be lies. He wanted to hear something beside the truth. The truth was an ugly thing — a very ugly thing. Why do people ever tell the truth? His soul hungered for lies,— the gay, delightful lies that old Jabe could tell. Harmless lies, they could hurt no one, not even the teller of them.

Uncle Jabe was smoking his pipe on the doorstep, and gently but quite audibly berating a squirrel which refused to come to eat out of his hand, a most insulting thing for a squirrel to do, if one could judge by the scornful remarks of the gate-keeper.

"Hello!" he called out in his cracked voice to Eric as the young man unlatched the gate. Somewhat summarily, he cast a handful of peanuts at the very head of the astonished squirrel, and hobbled over to meet his visitor. "Dang little fool of an idiot," he complained, as a final opinion of the scurrying quadruped. "Starve, if you want to." This in the face of thoughtless prodigality. "Well, well, Eric, I'm glad to see you. Where you been keepin' yourself?"

Eric wrung the gnarled old paw. Presently they were sitting side by side on the bench, leaning back against the wall of the cottage.

"Uncle Jabe, I wish you'd tell me that story again of the fight you had with the pirates who held Lady

Imogen in captivity. That was the very best thing you ever did. Tell it once more."

Jabez scratched his head, blinking his faded little eyes in considerable surprise and embarrassment. He coughed rather dismally. "I — I can't jest exactly place that — Oh, yes, I know the one. But you see, Eric, that was the most gosh-all-whacking lie of all."

"Never mind. That's just why I want to hear it. Go on, please."

The ancient regarded him speculatively. "You are jest like a teeny little kid. They're always askin' you to tell the same story over and over ag'in."

"I'm kind of lonesome, just for one of your whackingest ones, Uncle Jabe," said Eric, rather plaintively. "Don't tell me a true one."

"By ginger, I ain't got any true ones," exclaimed Jabez, very truthfully. "Leastwise, I can't remember the true ones. My memory ain't what it used to be. Come to that, I'm danged if I believe I can recollect the lies either. It's powerful unhandy to have to remember what's lies and what ain't."

"But the one about Lady Imogen was a fine one."

Jabez was racking his brain. "It must ha' been," he mused sadly. "That's why it's slipped my mind. Who was she? I mean, this here Lady Imogen you're talkin' about."

"The daughter of the Earl of Gaystone," supplied the grown-up child.

"Um," said Jabez uncomfortably. "She couldn't ha' been. There never was a Earl of Gaystone. Say, see that squirrel over yander? The blamed little —"

"Tell another one, if you can't remember that one," Eric broke in. "I'm actually homesick for one of your good old tales. I want to go back to the old days, Uncle Jabe."

"Somethin' gone wrong, my lad?"

"Yes," said Eric, leaning his head against the wall and staring up at the tree-tops.

Jabez was silent for a moment.

"All right," said he gently. "I'll tell you a new one — a rip-snorter."

CHAPTER XX

"ON INFORMATION AND BELIEF"

Joan Bright walked briskly up Blagden Avenue the next morning. The day was warm, and sweet, and spring-like; the sky was blue; the trees were beginning to don their gay greenery, and the dead leaves of last fall no longer littered the well-kept lawns.

She was abroad early, bound for the home of Horace Blagden, to see Mary Midthorne. Her blithe young heart would not stay closed against the wayward friend; she was off to make peace with her and to beg forgiveness for her own shortcomings.

She had thought it all out. She had been thinking it all out for weeks and months. After all, what had Mary done that was so deserving of reproach? Nothing,— nothing at all, Miss Bright was arguing, when one came to sift out the facts of the case. For that matter, had not her own judgment of Mary's frivolities been formed while she was still under the influence of those back-number morals of the old Corinth? She had pronounced herself broad-minded, even in the old days before the reconstruction; now she realised that she had been narrow — not so narrow as the rest of them, Heaven forbid! — but disposed to a shortness of vision that did not permit her to see far beyond the confines of a very small circumference.

In some unaccountable way, she theorised, everything in Corinth had undergone a subtle change. Churchgoing, for instance, struck her as a rather sprightly proceeding nowadays, instead of the laboriously sombre duty it once had been. Corinth, throughout all its concentrated life, had gone to church with a stately energy; now it seemed to have conceived the idea it was pleasanter to go about it cheerfully, gladly, even springily. Joan found herself comparing Corinth with other satisfying places in the great big world,— not the Babylons, but the clean, wholesome, alive places where one could take a deep breath of God's air and not feel contaminated because the ungodly shared it in common.

Blagden Avenue was no wider than it had ever been; it just seemed to her that it was. What influence had been at work to open the front room window blinds in all the houses along the Avenue, not only on week days but on the Sabbath? The front room or parlour gloom of sanctuary no longer prevailed, she noticed that. Sunday nowadays found the light streaming into those prim and virtuous rooms with all the glory it could produce. She recalled other days, not so far off, when Corinth closed its front-room shutters for fear the world might look within and break the holy Sabbath day. Now Corinth sat on its front porches and gave welcome to the Sabbath all day long.

No wonder the town seemed new to her, and better.

She recalled certain comments her father had made in the automobile the day before while they were being whisked homeward after that uplifting service.

"Blagden Avenue seems broader than it was yesterday," he had said.

"It is quite as wide, literally, as Broadway, Judge Bright," said young Mr. Sallonsby.

"Ah, but the whole world is in Broadway."

"I think the world is just beginning to take notice of

Blagden Avenue," was the young man's comment. He meant to be sarcastic, but merely spoke the truth.

"The world isn't so bad as it's painted."

"Depends on local colour," said the young man, airing himself epigrammatically. He felt rather proud of it.

"And whether you look up or down," completed the Judge.

And so, said Joan to herself that night after Sallonsby had taken his departure, it all depends on the way one looked at Mary Midthorne's so-called indiscretions. She was rather ashamed of herself for having peeped at them from behind closed front-room shutters, so to speak.

Moreover, she *had* treated Eric rather cavalierly after church. Perhaps it was the thought of that which kept her awake nearly all of the night, trying to blot out the expression she had caught in his eyes.

She wondered if she would see him that morning. How handsome, how manly he had looked — But how now! She was on her way to see Mary and no one else. She reminded herself of this at least a dozen times during her progress up Blagden Avenue.

Suddenly her heart began to beat furiously, the colour came and went in her cheek, and her eyes experienced a curious effect of momentary uselessness.

Eric Midthorne had turned the corner above and was approaching her with long, vigorous strides, his head lowered, his hands in his coat pockets. The gray Fedora hat was pulled well down over his eyes. He looked up when he was twenty yards away, and saw her.

His face, which had been pale and worn a moment before, was now a dusky red. On the instant, hers became flushed and hot.

She extended her gloved little hand.

"How do you do, Eric," she said.

They were looking squarely into each other's eyes as if fascinated.

"I am on my way to see your father," said he, the breath suddenly gone from his lungs. He spoke as if it were a physical effort to do so. Then, as if remembering himself, he released her hand.

She waited a moment. "In regard to the plans?" she asked in the same manner and quite without purpose. She could feel the blood roaring in her head.

"Yes. I — I can't undertake the work," he replied, the words coming rapidly. "I must give it up. He'll have to get someone else."

Her eyes fell; her cheeks lost their vivid colour.

"I — he won't let you off, Eric," she stammered. "I am sure he will not."

His smile was not pleasant to see.

"A great deal has happened since the bargain was made," he said. The word "bargain" possessed an ominous, even accusing sound for her.

She met his gaze. "I am on my way to see Mary now," she said, as if that explained everything that had passed.

His face brightened. "You are? I'm glad, Joan. Nothing should come between you two. Mary loves you."

"Then it will be all right," said she, eagerly. "I was quite wrong — stupidly wrong. I hope she will understand and — and overlook some of the —"

"Why couldn't you have written me that you'd ceased to care, Joan?" he broke in regardless. "Why did you let me go on thinking that you — But, good heaven, what am I saying? You are right. You have made it easy for me. It would have been hard — oh, so hard to have broken it off if you had gone on caring."

She started. Suddenly she was the Joan of old. "Broken it off?" she cried blankly. "I don't understand."

"I will not ask why you have ceased caring," he went on rapidly. "That is your own affair. I am glad that you are spared the pain of caring for someone — in that way — who isn't worthy. You have found someone who deserves —"

"Eric, I —" she began tremulously, then caught herself up with an effort. "Let me turn back with you, please do," she substituted in low, eager tones. "I must see you alone, I must talk with you, Eric. There is so much I have to say that can't be said out here in —"

"Joan!" he cried. "You don't mean that you —"

"I — I haven't changed," she murmured. "There isn't anyone else — there *couldn't* be."

"And Sallonsby?" he said, the blood rioting in his veins.

"You have never been out of my thoughts — not for a moment, day or night. Oh, we cannot talk here!"

He forgot his troubles in the great joy that swept over him, in the discovery that she was true after all. The tender word "sweetheart" burst from his lips. A mist swam before his eyes. But, almost with his breath of joy came the chill that blighted it.

He would have to hurt her, after all. His face grew bleak and haggard, his lip trembled. She misconstrued the emotion that was depicted there.

"When I heard that you were here, I insisted on coming home," she went on breathlessly. "Father telegraphed to me last week. I had told him that the yacht was to extend the cruise several weeks longer."

"But you knew I was coming on the eighth," he said. "You had my letters."

"They were forwarded to me. I got them at Havana. And, Eric," she continued, flushed and ill-at-ease, "I was afraid you would hate me for my treatment of Mary. I misjudged her. It was because I was jealous. She preferred to be with John Payson and those women friends of his. I couldn't help resenting it."

"Payson is a gentleman. I've found that out for myself," said Eric, indirectly defending Mary.

"It was all so very childish of me," she confessed. "I am ashamed of myself."

They were now walking slowly, side by side, toward her home. Obviously, Mary was no longer paramount to her intentions.

He halted her abruptly.

"It's no use, Joan," he exclaimed. "I can't let it go on. Something has happened. You will know what it is before the day is over. I haven't the courage to tell you myself."

Her hand was on his arm.

"Nothing can matter, Eric — nothing in the world," she said glibly. "You are disappointed in me. You have a grievance, but it is imaginary. I can smooth those lines away if you will just be patient with me. You are peeved and unhappy, you poor boy."

"It's got to end," he repeated doggedly.

She stared. Alarm showed in her eyes.

"There isn't anyone else?" she asked, after a moment.

"No, no!" he cried out bitterly.

"Then why —" she began impetuously, but checked the words to say instead: "Eric, dear, won't you come home with me? We will not say another word all the way. When we are in the house you may tell me everything. But you *must* come with me."

They came upon Judge Bright in the yard. He smiled genially as they drew near, failing to note the serious look in their faces or the dejected droop of Eric's head.

The young man had been thinking hard during those blocks of self-imposed silence. He owed the truth to Joan. It was wrong in him to even think of leaving her in the dark, unprepared for the shock that was to come later in the day. She should have it first from his lips.

"So he *wasn't* offended by the way you ran off and left him yesterday —" began the Judge. His daughter's face became very pink, she caught her breath in dismay.

Eric smiled wearily. So there had been compunctions! She had talked it over with her father. There was something in that to be treasured.

The Judge said ahem! thrice in rapid succession, and fell away before the daggers in Joan's eyes. With a very perfunctory remark about the splendour of the day, he stood aside to let them pass, grimly certain of a bad half hour when she had him alone.

Her cheeks were still pink when she preceded Eric into the library. Turning abruptly, she placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Eric, I want you to hold me in your arms as you —"

He crushed her to his breast. For a long time they stood so, their hot young lips meeting in long, devouring kisses.

At last he released her, and drew back with a groan of despair. She was smiling radiantly up into his eyes.

"It isn't so terrible after all, is it?" she cried breathlessly. Then she noticed his expression. "Was it so terrible as all that?" she exclaimed, pouting.

She was pulling off her gloves, all the while watching him as he stood grim and silent against the huge library table, as if in need of support. Then off came her trim jacket. He did not offer to assist her. She was puzzled.

"Don't remove your hat, Joan," he said, holding up his hand. "Stand there, just as you are, while I tell you why it cannot go on. I love you — I worship you. I don't want you ever to forget that, dearest."

Again he spared not the details. The whole story poured from his lips with a rush that left her powerless to interrupt. Her eyes never left his set, unflinching face. A sort of stupefaction possessed her. He saw the various changes of expression that followed the dawn of comprehension: the widening of her eyes in horror, the narrowing in pain, the flashes of excitement and sympathy, the dying of all that had been joyous.

"I am sorry, Joan," he said at the end, after waiting a moment for her to speak. "You understand. I had to tell you, just as I told the others."

He expected her to turn away from him with a shudder of revulsion,— he dreaded it. But she did not turn away. She stood still, her hands gripping the chair which supported her, her big eyes looking into the very soul of him.

"I'll go now," he muttered, suddenly weak and trembling.

"Wait!" she said, almost mechanically. "Where are you going?"

"To the sheriff," he announced. "Will you tell your father? He will understand why I can't go on with the house. He need never know what we have been to each other. Perhaps it is better that he should not know. You —"

With a sharp, inarticulate cry she threw herself on his breast; she pressed his cheeks with her tense little hands and shook him desperately, fiercely. Quick, hysterical sentences rushed from her lips.

"You are *not* a murderer. You were not to blame. Do you think I will let you go away feeling as you do? Do you think all this can change me in the least? Except to make me love you more than ever — a thousandfold more. Eric, Eric, you must listen to me. I mean it,— every word of it. I will not let you go."

. . . .

An hour later, Eric walked down Blagden Avenue, accompanied by Judge Oswald Bright. The older man had his arm linked with that of his companion. From the porch of the house they had just left, Joan waved to them as they turned to look back from the corner below where the hedges grew high and wall-like.

"If I should happen to wake up right now," said Eric, a trifle unsteadily, "I'm afraid the disappointment would kill me. Of course, it's only a dream."

The Judge smiled. "You've just come out of a dream,— and a very bad one at that. A nightmare six years long! Good heaven, what an age! I shudder to think of what it has been to poor old Horace and Mrs. Blagden."

They were on their way to the office of a lawyer in Bank Street, pursuant to a plan of action advanced by Joan's father after he had recovered sufficiently from the effect of two shocks,— for it is always a shock to a father, even though he may have suspected his daughter's secret all along. He agreed with Eric that it was best for him to put himself in the hands of the law without delay, and to go through the form of being legally relieved of the charge of manslaughter.

"But I — I can't ask Joan to be my wife, Judge Bright, even though I am discharged —" Eric had started to say back there in the house, only to be stopped by the girl.

"You've already asked me," she had said, "and I will not release you."

Whereupon Judge Bright had gravely said, laying his hands on the young man's shoulders:

"We have only the law to consider, Eric. If the law puts no barrier between you and Joan, I shall not do so. You understand?"

"You mean, if the law says I am innocent?"

"That's it, my lad."

"I understand, Judge Bright."

They had considered the designs of Horace Blagden, who, for reasons best known to himself, had carefully avoided Eric since that harrowing scene in the library. In order to anticipate any inimical move on the part of Chetwynd's father, Judge Bright volunteered to go at once to the house on the hill for the purpose of arguing the case before the real judge, the real prosecutor. He tried to share with Eric the belief that Mr. Blagden would refuse to prosecute. But he was not yet able to view Horace Blagden in the aspect of humility that Eric described; he had known the great man of Corinth all his life. He was not so sure that he could change his spots.

. . . .

As a matter of fact, neither Mr. Blagden nor his wife left the room during the remainder of that awful Sabbath, nor did they appear for breakfast the next morning. Eric and Mary had sat up half the night, waiting in suspense and dread for the library door to open to admit the gaunt figure of their uncle. As friend or foe it mattered little toward the end of their vigil, so eager were they to have the ordeal over with. They could hear the tread of footsteps overhead, and the occasional murmur of voices through the bedroom door. At midnight the light in the room was extinguished and the two who waited stole off to bed, the unknown verdict hanging over them.

They slept not. Long after the clock struck three, — not the old clock in the hall, but the new one in the Court-house dome,— they heard a door open stealthily and then the soft shuffle of feet in the hallway. A board in the floor creaked near Eric's door. He did not move, but the cold perspiration crept out all over his body.

Someone stood outside his door, listening. Sharp ears might have heard the beating of the heart that drummed in Eric's breast. Then the ghostly creaking of the board again, and the shuffling of those stealthy feet. A distant door whined softly and a lock clicked. Then the house was still once more.

Eric sprang out of bed and opened his door. There was no light in the transom down the hall.

He and Mary breakfasted together. Martha, more mystified than she had ever been in all her life, informed them that the Master and Mrs. Blagden would have their coffee upstairs.

Eric had hurried off immediately after that dismal meal. He was barely out of sight beyond the hedge at the bottom of the yard, when Horace came down the stairs, meeting Mary in the hall.

"Where has Eric gone?" he demanded, visibly agitated. His manner was so strange that the girl involuntarily drew back against the stair-rail.

"He — he has —" she stammered.

"Speak! Where has he gone?" interrupted her uncle sharply.

"He has gone to the — the Court-house, Uncle Horace, to give himself —"

He did not wait for her to complete the sentence, but turned and ascended the stairs with unusual swiftness. A few minutes later he came down, attired for the street. As he passed her in the hall, he said:

"Your aunt would like you to come up to her for a little while, Mary. I am obliged to go out for a short time."

He went down the walk swiftly, his tall figure as straight as a ramrod, his cane pegging resolutely on the hard gravel path. He left the gate open, an absolutely unique oversight on his part. Such a thing had not happened in the memory of man. Even Chetwynd had been punctilious about closing the high iron gate in the wall at the bottom of the yard. But to-day Horace himself left it wide open as he hurried off in the direction of the city centre.

Mrs. Blagden did not keep Mary long in the room upstairs. To the girl's surprise, the shades were up as high as they would go, the lace curtains and the chintz over-hangings were drawn back and caught in loops over the long unused brass hooks at the sides of the windows. The sun streamed into the room. Her aunt sat by a window, looking into the yard. As Mary entered, she turned toward her, holding out her hand.

ing, almost dreading. And oh, the fear of Adam Carr! The fear of a bloodhound!"

"Don't, Aunt Rena, please don't think about it," came in choked tones from Mary.

Her aunt was pensive for a long time, her far-away gaze resting on the rim of blue sky that topped the trees.

"I hope your uncle is not too late," she said, a sudden weariness in her manner.

Mary sprang to her feet. The thought that had been lying dormant in her mind all morning revived with startling force.

"Eric may have gone first to Mrs. Payson's house," she said rapidly. "He tried to find John Payson last night. It was to see about arranging a bond of some sort. Perhaps he is there now."

"John Payson!" exclaimed Mrs. Blagden, her face stiffening. "Why should he ask anything of that man?"

A lump rose in Mary's throat. She saw red for an instant.

"Because he needs a strong, true friend, Aunt Rena," she said.

"I should think he'd had enough of Adam Carr," said the other, with a world of meaning in her manner.

"I know what you mean," said Mary patiently. "But it isn't true,— it isn't true, Aunt Rena."

"Your uncle says —"

"I know what he thinks, if not what he says. Uncle Horace is wrong. But even if he is right, why should it matter? John Payson can't help who and what he is. The same God who made all of us made him also. He is what God made him, not what Uncle Horace and others try to —"

"Hush, Mary. Do not say anything more. I should not have spoken as I did. It was the old rancour cropping out. Your uncle, good man that he is, bears no ill-will toward Jack Payson now. He said as much last night in this very room. Ah, what a change has come over Horace Blagden!"

She unconsciously gave expression to the great wonder that had been growing in her for days.

"When you are married to him," went on Mrs. Blagden, "we shall be glad to receive him as our nephew, provided he can accept us as we are, not as we were."

"Oh, I am sure, Aunt Rena,—" began Mary joyously.

"Do not speak for Jack Payson, my dear," said the older woman calmly. "Let him do that for himself."

It was then that Mary proposed that she set out for Mrs. Payson's home at once, with the view to finding Eric. It was still early and he was doubtless there in consultation with Payson, who was not to return to New York until late in the afternoon.

"Go, my dear," said her aunt. "Lose no time. It is most imperative."

. . . .

As for Eric, we know that he did not go to the Widow Payson's.

With Judge Bright he entered the county Court-house at ten o'clock. They had gone to the office of the lawyer in Bank Street, only to be told by the clerk that Mr. Gates unexpectedly had been called to the sheriff's office a few minutes earlier. He did not know the nature of the business, but it was important, as his superior had departed in haste.

As they walked down the corridor they were met by the editor of the *Courier*, who came up from the other entrance, quite out of breath and visibly excited.

"Hello," he said. Being an editor, he was on familiar terms with everyone, great and small. A Justice of the Supreme Court possessed no terrors for him. "Morning, Judge. Well, well, Eric, let me congratulate you. Great piece of news. All in type by this time, too. I —"

"Congratulate?" gasped Eric.

"Type?" ejaculated Judge Bright.

"Sure. Your uncle released it by 'phone ten minutes ago, and told me to get over here as quickly as I could. Corinth will turn over in its grave when it sees the *Courier* this evening. Great guns! Think of a library building bigger than the new paper mill and straw-board works combined! Why, it's —"

Eric's bitter laugh stopped him.

"I fancy, Cooper, you'll have another bit of news that will surprise you," said Judge Bright.

"Not the wedding announcement!" gasped Cooper, showing how the wind blew.

"That comes later on," said the Judge.

"Well, well, I — I *do* congratulate you," said the editor, sticking out his hand once more. But Eric's eyes were on the door of the sheriff's office and he did not see the ink-stained fingers.

"In the private office, Judge," said the lone deputy in the front office. "Waitin' for Eric in there. H'are you, Eric? What's up?"

Mr. Cooper was following the pair into the private office when the deputy called out to him:

"Private, Joe. Can't go in yet."

"I've been sent for," retorted Cooper, the editor.

"Set down. They'll send again, I guess," said the deputy succinctly.

There were three men in the private office, all standing. Judge Bright closed the door. Mr. Gates, the lawyer, stood beside the table, confronting the sheriff and the state's attorney. The latter evidently had been reading aloud the document which he held in his hand. The sheriff, a fat little man with chin whiskers, was looking over the other's shoulder as the newcomers entered. He immediately turned to them, betraying considerable excitement.

"So here you are, Midthorne," he greeted, stepping forward. "Glad to see you. How are you this morning? Morning, Judge. Well,—" he affected a pleasant grin,—"I guess it won't take long to fix it all up. This is the state's attorney, Mr. Midthorne. Reckon you know Mr. Gates. He is to represent you, I believe. Course, I suppose, to be quite regular, I should put you under arrest, Mr. Midthorne. But what's the use going over all that? We understand each other, I reckon, so —"

"But I do not understand," cried Eric in astonishment. "How do you happen to know what I am here for? No one knows except —"

"Oh, Mr. Blagden's upstairs in the court-room now, waiting for us," explained the sheriff. "Got the bond all ready to be signed and everything. So, don't worry. Mr. Collins here has got the affydavit drawn,— on information and belief, ain't it? — and as long as you're satisfied to give yourself up, it won't be necessary for me to have a warrant. Course, the affydavit will have to be read, and all that, but it won't take long."

"My uncle has been here?" gasped Eric, recovering from his surprise.

Mr. Gates came forward. "He has attended to everything, Mr. Midthorne. You may leave it all in my hands. I think we will have no difficulty in securing a speedy trial. You — but we will discuss the matter later in my office." He waved his hand in the direction of the state's attorney, smiling blandly. "You see, we can't afford to play into the hands of the enemy."

Completely dazed, Eric followed the men out of the office and up the broad steps to the court-room. Mr. Cooper took it upon himself to walk beside the young man.

"What's up?" he whispered eagerly. "What's going on? Put a fellow next, Eric. The — old geezer upstairs isn't thinking of a divorce, is he?"

"Good heaven, no!" exclaimed Eric. He liked Joe Cooper. "Wait a few minutes. I can't tell you now."

The court-room was quite empty, except for the presence of a lone figure seated inside the railing, quite close to the bench, and two bailiffs who conversed lazily at one of the windows overlooking Main Street.

Despite its deserted appearance, court was in session. The judge leaned forward to converse in subdued tones with the man below. He looked up as the group came through the swinging doors, and settled back in his chair to compose himself for that typical exposition of judicial indifference that never fails to create in the mind of the layman doubt as to whether the Court is asleep or awake, or merely thinking of something entirely foreign to the cause before him. And just when you think he is sleeping the soundest, he starts up and says something so pertinent that you know he has been listening all the time. Only it does make one drowsy to watch the half-recumbent Court on a warm day late in the April term. You wonder if he, too, isn't thinking of meadow-larks.

Eric, a trifle dazed and bewildered, stopped just inside the rail, while the others went forward,— that is to say, with the single exception of the sheriff, who, after several leisurely strides, bethought himself of his prisoner and halted in some conflict between his duty as a custodian and a certain inborn tendency to avoid anything that might give offence to Mr. Horace Blagden. He managed to console himself with the thought that, figuratively, he had haled his prisoner into court. Still, he halted and motioned for Eric to draw nearer and sit down.

The prisoner — for he was a prisoner in the strict sense of the word — did not sit down, but stood there staring at the tall, thin figure of his uncle, who had risen and was facing him. The domineering look had come back into the face of Horace Blagden. It was the look of the man who takes things in his own hands and has his own way, no matter what the issue. He had quite overlooked the fact that this was Eric's affair, to be handled as he saw fit, and had taken the initiative without consulting his nephew's wishes,— a very characteristic Blagden trait that had not been completely overcome, it would appear.

Suddenly a smile crept into his face, an appealing, wistful smile that was more of an apology than all the words he could have uttered. A moment before he would have commanded Eric to approach; now he hesitatingly motioned with his hand.

Together they stood before the Court while Mr. Collins read the affidavit. The two bailiffs, aroused from their lethargy, drew near, and the deputy clerk emerged from the inner room in response to a summons from the bench. Mr. Blagden had shaken hands with his nephew, and had stroked his shoulder kindly.

The puzzled editor, taking note of this, blinked his eyes dizzily. It was most extraordinary! A minute later he was drinking in the most stupendous news story that ever had come to him in all his years of experience: the solution of the great Blagden mystery.

"Say 'not guilty,'" whispered Mr. Blagden in Eric's ear.

"Not guilty," said Eric, taking his eyes from the prosecutor's face to stare blankly at his uncle.

He heard the Court speaking. He was being bound over in the sum of ten thousand dollars to the next term, unless the case could be moved forward by mutual consent and in the convenience of the Court.

"Mr. Oakes and Mr. Elston will sign the bond, Mr. Sheriff," said Horace. "I daresay they are waiting in your office now. Shall we go down?"

"But I don't know either of these gentlemen," protested Eric. "Besides, I mean to have John Payson attend to the bond for —"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Blagden, "it is all attended to. There can't be any hitch. I've telephoned to Mr. Oakes and Mr. Elston, asking them to come here at once. I shall tell them what it is all about when I see them. They will be very happy to go on the bond, I am sure. Some sort of ridiculous law prohibits my signing the bond, my boy, or at least, so your attorney informs me."

In the corridor, Eric came out of the daze that had held him in a sort of stupor during all of the proceedings. He drew his uncle aside.

"Uncle Horace," he said simply, "I don't know what to say to you. I don't know how to express myself. Will you give me time to think it all out and let me tell you later how much I —"

" Eric," interrupted the older man, " I am doing all this to please your aunt and myself. We are very selfish people. We are covetous. We have discovered that there is something that we have always wanted and never really had. We want to be loved."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MORNING IN HANDY STREET

In the meantime, Mary Midthorne had found Jack Payson. She descended from exclusive Upper Corinth into the prim but humble district known as the Fourth Ward, where lived the plain people; here no man was downright poor, yet none was rich, save in honour and contentment. You had but to look at the long rows of cottages to know that peace reigned external if not eternal. There were no outward signs of envy or jealousy, yet how well the woman was despised whose husband prospered so steadily that he was looking at property 'way up town with a view to building a house that was "fit to live in." Even the erection of a summer kitchen or the expansion of the front stoop into a verandah was proof of an affluency that came in for general resentment and all sorts of talk about "pride going before a fall."

But the people of Corinth never fell in just that way. Their thrift was their pride. If they fell it was not because pride had anything to do with it, but because it was the height of extravagance to carry fire insurance. You might burn them out, but in no other way could you humble them — especially those who lived in the Fourth Ward.

The Widow Payson lived in one of the clean little streets that lay within easy walking distance of every other place in Corinth. If you had a springy, projecting stride, you could easily make the docks in five minutes, or you could circle the Court-house square and do a block or two extra on Main Street in six or seven. Besides, it wasn't far to Upper Corinth, and was farther removed from the detested Todville. There was really something in that. By an odd perfection of street nomenclature, it was called Handy Street in commemoration of a citizen who went to war as a private and came out a corporal. A great favourite with Washington, the story goes, and intensely disliked by King George the Third.

At any rate, Mrs. Payson lived in Handy Street. Hers was a neat little cottage with vines growing all over it, and a garden at the back with a white-washed fence around it, just as you might have expected. There was a great knocker on the vine-surrounded door inside the porch, and a name plate, and a peep-hole with a sliding shutter. As quaint a place as you would see in a day's journey through old New England.

Mary, flushed and suddenly shy, rattled the knocker after a rather timid fashion. The door was opened at once, to her great surprise. She had been watching the closed shutter in the ancient peep-hole as if fascinated, confidently expecting to see it slide back to reveal a grewsome, questioning eye.

John Payson himself opened the door. A certain haggard, tired expression left his face as if by magic. If she had been less absorbed in her own feelings, she would have noticed something more than surprise in the eyes of her lover.

"Why, Mary!" he exclaimed, throwing the door wide open. "What has happened? Has anything gone wrong with Eric?"

"Hasn't he been here? You have not seen him?" she inquired anxiously.

He had not asked her to enter, but stood before her, blocking the doorway.

"I have not seen him," he said, a queer nervousness in his manner. "What has happened? Tell me. Can I be of any service to him?"

"May I not come in, Jack?" she asked, suddenly struck by the odd look in his eyes. A swift premonition of disaster came over her. He was so palpably ill-at-ease and confused; he was keeping something back from her. "Why do you look at me so queerly? Oh, Jack, he — he hasn't tried to —" She was terrified. The ugly suspicion could not be put into words.

He made haste to reassure her. "I have not seen him. My mother says he was here last night, when I was away." He hesitated for a moment and then went on, his face ghastly white. "I would ask you to come in, Mary, but something terrible has happened here. You would better go on to Eric and leave me to look after —"

"Not your mother, Jack?" she cried, staring.

His eyes fell. For a moment his lips worked painfully, then became rigid. When he looked up again, the utmost desolation lay in his eyes.

"No, Mary. My father," he said levelly.

She peered intently into his eyes. Her brain was absolutely clear.

"You — you mean —" Every vestige of colour had fled from her face.

He did not permit his gaze to waver, nor his face to change expression. His voice fell to a dull monotone.

"My father did not go down with the *Lanigan*. He lies in there on my bed, stricken, helpless, perhaps dying. That is all, Mary. Why ask me to say more?"

She leaned against the trellis, trembling in every limb.

"It *is* true, then," she whispered dully.

"He is in there," said he, in dogged acquiescence.

"Adam Carr?"

"My father."

They stood there for a long time, looking into each other's eyes, the misery deepening in their faces. He turned away at last.

"You'd better go away now, Mary," he said gently. "When you see Eric, tell him that he won't have to look me up. It is all over. He was right. I am not worthy. But good heaven, Mary, I did not know,—I did not know! I thought I was as good as any man living, and had the right to love as other men love. But, go, for God's sake go! I cannot bear to have you hear —"

She advanced, her trembling hands pressed to her breast, her eyes dark with pain and understanding.

"Let me come in," she murmured faintly. "There is something that I must say to you. I came here to ask you to help Eric, to be his friend. He is in great trouble. Let me —"

He stood aside, making way for her to pass. The despair in his face gave way to a look of genuine concern and anxiety.

"In trouble? What can I do for him? Let me set about it at once. Perhaps I can serve him before he learns the full truth concerning me. After he knows, it will be too late. He would not accept my friendship. Ask me to die for you,— or for Eric, if that will help you,— and I will do it gladly. Yes, joyfully."

She walked into the parlour. Through her whirling brain ran the lines of that rare old bit of rhyme: "Will you walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly." Somehow, she felt that entanglement awaited her in the dim, shadowy room,—something she would never be able to escape from. She had never been inside the Widow Payson's home before. Always, in her mind's eye, she had pictured it as plain, poor and stiffly puritanical. Perhaps it had been all this another day, but now there were signs of coziness, even luxury in a small way. Her son had not prospered without the thought of her back of all his gains. There were handsome rugs on the floor; quaint old pieces of furniture, attractive pictures, cheerful wall-paper, rich window hangings and portières. A tall walnut bookcase stood over against the wall, filled with volumes. The girl was dimly conscious of a feeling of relief. If the room had looked like other parlours she had seen in Corinth, the sense of desolation would have been complete; she would have lost heart.

He closed the door gently, even carefully. She turned to look at him. He was peering fixedly at the drawn curtains of the door that opened into the room beyond: the attitude of one listening. The odour of a familiar and potent drug was faintly distinguishable. The girl experienced a queer feeling of dizziness, of nausea.

"Where is your mother?" she asked abruptly.

He drew up a chair for her, but she remained standing.

"In there,—with him," he replied, passing his hand over his brow. "The doctor is there, too. But, tell me, Mary, what is up with Eric? What is it you want me to do?"

He made no effort to embrace her, not even the attempt to take her hand in his. The omission was significant.

She was staring at him, a swiftly passing expression of doubt and wonder in her eyes. "Hasn't Mr. Ad — your — I mean, hasn't Mr. Carr told you *anything?*" she asked. She fell into his way of speaking in hushed tones. He shook his head, and waited for her to go on. Her gaze involuntarily went to the curtained door. "He *can* keep a secret," she murmured.

"I am afraid he is beyond the telling of secrets," was his grim conclusion.

She started. "He is — he isn't dead?" she whispered, bleak awe in her eyes. Suddenly she realised what Adam Carr's death would mean to Eric. Her heart gave a bound of hope, of exultation. The only witness! "Why — why, if he were only dead —" she began, a positive thrill in the voice, only to find the words dying on her lips. She quailed before the look in his eyes. "Oh, what a brutal thing to say!" she cried, putting her hands to her cheeks and staring at him with shamed eyes. "How selfish I am! What a little beast!"

He looked bewildered. "I don't understand all this," he said. "He isn't dead, poor Mr. Adam," he went on, unconscious of the appellation. "That's the worst of it. Better off a thousand fold than the way he is. He can keep a secret, you say. Ah, he can that! I know how well he can keep a secret. He has never betrayed *my* secret. Not a word from him — not a single word. He will die without breathing it to a soul. Ten thousand devils could not choke or beat it out of him. He would die ten thousand deaths in agony rather than say the thing that would hurt me. And now he is lying in there, voiceless and — But what is this I'm saying? I am terrifying you, my poor little sweetheart. Ranting like a mad-man! Forgive me."

"I am afraid, Jack," she whispered, directing a look of abject terror at the motionless curtains, as if expecting them to part and reveal a thing of horror. "I can't stay here. What is it? What has happened? For heaven's sake, tell me at once. I shall scream if —"

She was edging farther away from him.

"Come outside," he said quickly. "This is no place for you, dear."

He was moving toward the door, but she stopped him with a word.

"Wait!"

After a moment's hesitation, she withdrew her gaze from the curtains and turned to look at him. "I will go away, Jack dear, for a little while. Forgive me for disturbing you. Of course, I could not have known. You are needed here. You cannot leave. I will go away. I —"

"I can't let you go until I know what has happened," he urged. "Don't be afraid. Tell me. I can be of no service to — to him," with a jerk of his head toward the inner room. "He doesn't need me. My mother, — she wants me to be near at hand in case — in case of — well, you know what I mean. He's very low. He may die — like this," and he snapped his fingers sharply in illustration. "It's as bad as that. Stay! We can go into her sitting-room. In here, Mary. It used to be my den when I lived at home. We can talk in —" He stopped, struck by her appearance.

"Listen," she whispered. "Do you hear? Is that — is that his breathing? Oh, how horrible!"

"Come," he said resolutely, taking her by the arm. She suffered herself to be led into the little room off the parlour. He took her to the sofa by the window and sat down beside her, suddenly clasping her cold little hand in his.

"Don't mind me," he said, his voice breaking. "What can I do — for you?"

She cringed. "How can I ask anything of you when a moment ago I was rejoicing in the hope that Adam — that your — Oh, Jack, I can't say it! I can't think of him as your father. Why — why —" her eyes were wide with comprehension —"it means that you are — are — are —"

"Don't say it, dear," he broke in. "Yes, I am what you think, but don't say it." He covered his eyes with his free hand, the other crushing her fingers in a grip of despair.

She raised his hand to her lips. His fingers relaxed. He uncovered his eyes to stare at her in wonder.

"I love you, just the same," she declared.

He started up. "Good God! No! You must never say that again — never!"

"But I do!" she insisted. "Always, Jack,— always!"

He sank back, the fierce light in his eyes giving way to one of compassion. Then he said, dully, drearily:

"You will think differently when you've had time, dear. I shall not hold you to those dear words. Now, let's deal with the present. What has happened?"

She told him in as few words as possible. In the end, she cried out bitterly:

"We haven't so much to be proud of, have we? Nothing to be set up about, Jack dear."

He was touched by the abject humility in her voice and manner. Her news had not produced in him the sensation of surprise and horror she expected. He had listened intently, but without a trace of excitement. This was a man's affair, and John Payson was schooled in the ways of men; he came by it naturally. He had seen other men in dire disaster, and other women. He had seen them in the depths and on the heights, and he had learned his lesson in the study of human emotions not so much through the medium of sentimentality as by means of a shrewd estimate of the intermediate levels. Man is up to-day and down to-morrow. His true position is not known, even to himself, for the simple reason that he passes it by without stopping. He has no self-recognised level; he avoids it because it is a commonplace state fit only for imbeciles.

John Payson had the power to analyse despair. He knew that the breath of a fair wind invariably blew warm against it and that the spirits went up as the mercury goes; a bleak wind drives them down. The same with joy. He had but to assure Mary Midthorne that he would do everything in his power to help her brother, and to set about doing it, and the despair that filled her for the moment would fly before the rush of hope and confidence.

He had seen the gloom of despair lift from the faces of men whose fortunes were at the lowest ebb at the cheerfully uttered sentence: "Well, things really look better to me to-day than they did yesterday."

He took the girl's hands in his and said firmly:

"Nothing will come of it, Mary. Rest easy. Your brother is taking the right direction at last. There is but one thing for him to do, and I fancy he is doing it. He knows he is not morally guilty. What he wants is a clear slate so far as the law is concerned. After all that is over, he will be in debt to no man. But, as you say, he needs a cheerful friend to help him at the outset. Well, I can be cheerful if needs be. I'm not much to speak of at present, but I'm better than a fair-weather friend. He has undoubtedly gone to the sheriff's office. I will hurry over at once and see what can be done about the bond. He will need that, of course. I can manage it easily if it isn't too steep. This house belongs to me; also the office building at the corner of Main and Fourth Streets. That should be sufficient security for —"

"Oh, Jack, I didn't come here to ask you to go bail for him," she cried, a deep flush in her cheek. "We couldn't think of it. You didn't understand me, I am sure."

"You mean that Eric would not accept me as surety?" he asked, his face clouding.

"No, no,— not that either," she said, greatly distressed. "Only that you should not be asked to risk your property —"

"Nonsense!" he said, and there was no mistaking the relief in his voice. "Now, go home, please, and rest secure. Don't stay here, little girl. I will go to the Court-house as soon as the doctor comes out to report. Mother won't mind being left alone for a while. Provided, of course, there is no immediate —"

She caught the note of anxiety in his voice. "No, Jack dear, you must not leave her. I will not let you do it. Your place is here. It was horribly selfish of me to even think —"

A door near at hand was closed gently; then came the rustle of heavy curtains, and the tread of footsteps in the parlour. Mary shot an anxious look over her shoulder, arresting her own self-arraignment.

"The doctor," said he quickly. He crossed rapidly and opened the door. Then, with a glance at her, he left the room, closing the door behind him. She was left alone.

Not more than a minute passed before he returned. She could read nothing in his face.

"Pardon me," he said. "Dr. Spooner says there is no change. He may die within the hour or he may live for years. We have sent to New York for nurses and another doctor. They get here this afternoon. He — he is hopelessly paralysed. There was an apoplectic stroke as well. So, you see, it is impossible to tell what the outcome will be."

She shuddered. Her lips parted, but in horror, not in the effort to speak.

"I can't leave her just now," he went on painfully. "It wouldn't be right. I can't do it, not even for you, Mary. She wants me to come in there now. Go, please, and try to forget that I ever —" He could not complete the sentence, but turned away to hide his twitching lips and moist eyes.

She waited for a long time before speaking. Her heart was aching as it had never ached before.

"Listen, John," she said at last, "let me ask this question: when were you told the truth about yourself, and by whom?"

He faced her reluctantly. "Last night. She told me. We were sitting in this room. He — oh, why should we go into all this? I can't talk about it. Good-bye, Mary. Don't stay a minute longer. You *must* go."

"Yes, John," she said gently. "I will go now. I won't ask you to tell me anything more. I don't want to hear it. But, listen to me, dear: nothing — nothing in all this world, can alter my love for you, nothing can come between us. It is *you* I love. Do you understand?" She went up to him and laid her hands on his shoulders. There was a wonderful sweetness in her voice.

"My little Mary," he murmured, shaken by a mighty storm of emotion. He put his hands to her cool white cheeks and kissed her on the brow: not the kiss of passion, but of boundless adoration.

She smiled, her eyes looking full into his: a smile so steadfast and grave that he was never to forget it.

"Let me know, John, if there is anything I can do for — you," she said simply. "I will come if you need me."

She passed from the room and out of the house. He followed her to the door. She did not look back. When she was out of sight beyond the row of houses, he turned back, a great sigh escaping his lips. His feet dragged, his shoulders drooped as he crossed the parlour and drew aside the curtains.

The bedroom beyond was darkened. Closed shutters and drawn shades kept out the cheerful morning sun. The habit of darkening a sickroom still obtained in Corinth. In the corner beyond the window was the bed, white against the shadowy walls. Heavy, stertorous breathing came from the lungs of the motionless figure that stretched its length limply under the coverlet. There was no other sound to be heard about the house. Only this ghastly breathing. Payson stopped in the doorway, his heart sick with sudden, overwhelming pity for the once strong, virile man he had known all his life as a friend, steadfast and true. Whatever else, he was a friend worth having.

The Widow Payson sat near the foot of the bed. Either she did not hear the man at the door or she was indifferent to his presence in the room. At any rate, she did not look up, but kept her chin lowered and her eyes closed. She rocked gently, mechanically, in the low old-fashioned chair.

He watched her in silence for a few minutes. A great sob welled up in his throat, his eyes smarted with the rush of tears. Going to her side, he dropped to his knees and began kissing the worn, bony hand of the woman who sat sentinel over the man who was his father.

She opened her tired, dry eyes, and after a moment smiled.

"Don't cry, laddie," she said, laying her hand caressingly on his head. "I am sorry I told you. He may never speak again. I could have gone to my grave with the secret safe, and you would never have been the wiser. It would have been better. He meant you never should know, and he was right. I betrayed him. Sometimes I think he knows that I have told you. It's a queer feeling I have, with him lying there senseless and unknowing. Yet I have the feeling that he heard me talking last night, that he is listening now. If he does know, he must be hating me with all his soul. He must be despising —"

"Sh! Don't say that, Mother. Hate you? Why, how could he hate *you*,— you who have done so much for him and for me? Think of all the years of mothering me."

"All the years," she sighed. "Thirty odd. And now they're behind me, with only blank ones ahead. Ah, my little laddie, it is I who have suffered the cruelest blow, after all, and all through my own folly. Why couldn't I have held my stupid tongue? But I thought he was dying. I thought the end had come.

I was terrified. To think of him dying like that — strong, healthy man that he was. And you not knowing he was your own father. Why, I — I just couldn't keep it back. Alack! It has cost him nothing, nor has he gained more than he had before, but I have lost my laddie,— I have lost my little sonnie."

She buried her face in her hands and rocked back and forth in the chair, moaning as old women moan when stricken deep. Old women! The years have spared them the strength to moan; the shrill outcry is no longer their tribute to pain or grief. And yet what shriek of despair is more potent than the humble groan of an old woman?

He put his arm about her thin shoulders and drew her head close to his breast.

"Don't say that, Mother dear," he said, with infinite gentleness. "You will always be mother to me. There never will come a time when I will think of you as anything else. You are my dear little mother. Why, how can I think of you as being anything but mother? It is not possible. Do you think that a single day can wipe out the thing I have believed ever since I can remember? Haven't you always been mother to me? Can you expect me to forget that you are mother and then look upon that strange man over there as father? It isn't possible. It never can be possible. He is not 'father' to me, nor can you ever be anything but 'mother.'"

"Ah, John, you do not understand," she argued patiently. "The truth is out. Nothing can overcome that — not your reasoning, nor your love, nor your loyalty. I am not your mother. You may say what you like, but down deep in your heart I am not what I was to you yesterday — and all the years before yesterday. You have lost a mother. You cannot put me back where I was yesterday. I did not bring you into the world. You never saw your mother, but you never can put away from you the fact that she once lived and bore you. You cannot think of me as you must think of her —"

"Listen, Mother," he interrupted, "listen to me. Haven't I always thought of Henry Payson as my father? In spite of that man there, in spite of what I know to be true, I shall always think of Henry Payson as 'father.' I cannot help it. It's in here somewhere — in my brain, in my heart. Just as you are in here. What was the other woman to me? Not even a memory. I never saw Henry Payson, yet you know what he has always been to me. My father."

"Hush, John," she cautioned, with a quick glance at the pallid face of Adam Carr. "He may be able to hear. He may understand."

"Understand? What if he does? He has always understood. It would be nothing new to him. He has expected nothing of me — he has asked for nothing except my friendship. Ah, I begin to understand some things myself. I know now why I have always liked, always admired Adam Carr. I know why I have always depended on him, and been guided by him. He had the right to govern; he had the right to claim what Nature had given him."

"Poor man," sighed the Widow Payson. "He was a better father to you than most fathers are to the boys who know them as such. All his life he has been thinking of you, doing for you, saving for you. I have seen his will. In it there is no mention of the relationship that exists, but everything he possesses goes to 'John Payson, son of my old friend Henry Payson, deceased.' Even after his death, you were not to know. He has told me a thousand times that it would wreck your life if you ever came to know. It was his will and I obeyed. Nothing could change him, nothing could break him. I never knew a man so set in his ways. But you could tell that by his face. And you, John, are like him in a good many ways. You never flinch, you never give in. Ah, how many times have I said to myself 'like father, like son.'"

"Like him in every way," said he bitterly. "Midthorne noticed it. He threw it in my face,— he threw Adam Carr's face in mine. I shall never forget that. Nor shall I ever forget that I resented it more on Adam Carr's account than my own, strange as it may seem. You see, Mother, I've known my real father all my life and I've loved him always."

"You must ask God to forgive you for the harsh, cruel things you said to him last night, before the stroke came," she said.

"God understands everything," said he. "My heart was full of misery. For the first time in his life, Adam Carr taunted me. He laughed at me when I commanded him to dispel the doubts my mind had fixed on."

"He was beside himself," she explained. "You were driving him too hard. I could see the sweat on his brow."

He shuddered. "What a horrible thing it was! What a dreadful night!"

"It came upon him, even as he laughed. I — I wonder if God struck him for that." There was awe in the old woman's face.

"I wonder," he repeated after her.

The events of the preceding night may be chronicled in few words.

Adam Carr was coming to have tea with them in the evening. Mrs. Payson and John waited for him until long past the hour signified,— one that he had been in the habit of observing as long as they could remember,— but as he did not appear they sat down without him. She had remarked a curious depression in his manner when he dropped in shortly after the morning service. He seemed unusually "down in the mouth," as she expressed it, and significantly inquisitive as to the whereabouts of her son. He never spoke of him except as "her son." After a restless, preoccupied ten minutes, he left, with the statement that he was going off for a long walk on Stone Wall. He would be back for tea at half-past six. When he did not appear at that hour, nor up to eight o'clock, she suggested to John that he make inquiry of old Jabez, and, failing there, in other directions.

At ten o'clock John met him in the road, half-way to Bud's Rock. He was slowly walking homeward. The moon was high and full, and the thick, familiar figure was distinguishable for a long distance on the shell road.

He gave no satisfactory answer to John's impatient questions, but testily said that he had gone off to think something over where he would not be disturbed. A matter, he said, that was of the gravest importance. Payson quite naturally thought he had reference to an important piece of secret service work.

Adam accompanied the young man to his home, and went in to say good night to Mrs. Payson and to apologise for his unprecedented rudeness in forgetting tea. He acted so queerly that Jack insisted on going down to the hotel with him. His eyes were uncommonly prominent and stary, and his face was livid; his breathing was hard, his lips sagged instead of holding the firm, rigid line that always marked them.

He sat listless and morose in the big chair before the fireplace. The night-air from the sea had chilled him to the marrow. Payson set about to cheer him up. He began by telling him of Horace Blagden's remarkable after-service concession. Carr picked up his ears while John was commenting on Horace's sudden change of front, and even entered into the discussion; sceptically, it is true, but not without interest. He advanced the caustic opinion that Mr. Blagden was as playful as a tiger, and as safe to deal with. Nevertheless, he was keenly interested in Jack's opinion that Horace would no longer oppose the marriage.

One obstacle was left in the way, John announced; it would have to be removed before he could conscientiously hold Mary to her promise, which had been renewed that afternoon in no half-hearted terms. This led up to the question that lay so heavily in the lover's mind. What was the nature of the mystery attending his own origin? Adam's slack lips straightened out in a hard, stubborn line; he briefly declared that there was nothing to tell. Payson interrupted the look that passed between the man and the woman, and flew into a quick passion. He demanded the truth from them. The time had come when even his mother's feelings were not to be spared.

Mrs. Payson began to cry softly. Adam Carr upbraided her, an act so unusual that John at first was rendered speechless by a sort of stupefaction. The situation was tense, dramatic. With a great dread in his soul, the young man turned upon his mother and besought her to tell him the truth, no matter what the cost to him or to her.

She shrank away from him mumbling piteously. Then, he confronted Adam Carr. The older man looked up into the distorted face of the pleader and stubbornly insisted that there was nothing to tell. A sort of frenzy took possession of the young man. His manner became threatening. Adam continued to smile, but there was a hunted, imploring look in his eyes. He seemed to shrivel up in the chair, to grow older and weaker as he met the harsh charges without so much as a word of anger or resentment.

Suddenly he began to laugh.

"Good heaven!" cried John savagely. "What is there to laugh at?"

The senseless laughter continued for a moment, and then died away in a raucous gurgle. A purplish hue spread over Adam Carr's face, his eyes bulged, his hands dropped limply from the arms of the chair.

. . .

A long while afterward, as John worked feverishly with the stricken man, he became dimly conscious of the words his mother was moaning in his ear as she, too, leaned over the form of Adam Carr, now lying on the bed in the little room off the parlour.

"He is your father, John," she was saying. "Be good to him! Don't let him die. He is your own father. Do you hear me? Save him! Your own father!"

The blow had fallen. John Payson had got the truth at last.

Later on, he received another and more devastating shock. He learned from her lips that the woman he had always known as his mother was not his mother;

in no way was she related to him. The blow left him dazed, and quite as powerless as the paralysed creature on the bed.

Mrs. Payson herself went forth and aroused a neighbour, who set off in haste to summon Dr. Spooner.

John Payson was like his father in many ways. Among others, he possessed a wonderful power of self-control. In a surprisingly short time, he was able to face the crisis with as much composure and restraint as might have been expected of Adam Carr under similar circumstances. It was in the blood.

In the kitchen, while the doctor was working over the unconscious man in the bedroom, he stood before the Widow Payson and listened to a story that went back thirty years and more, listened calmly and without interruptions until every word of it was told. Then he went back with her to sit beside the man who would not acknowledge him but who loved him so well that he would die with the secret locked in his heart. The father who would not put the blight upon him.

. . . .

And now, the morning after, they again sat by the bedside.

"Tell me once more," said John gently, "just how it was that she — my mother — came to you."

He had gone over to peer into the unseeing eyes of his father, as if to make sure that no sign of awakening intelligence was there.

"I am afraid," she said nervously. "If he should really be able to hear, he would curse me I am sure for —"

"Nonsense, Mother," he said. "He will live to bless you. Matters will be very simple after all this is passed. He will thank you for giving him back his son."

"Yes, for robbing myself of one," she lamented.

"You will always be mother to me," said he gently. "Tell me again of her,— the other one. I have to get it all clearly in my mind. It's vague now."

She repeated the story of how he came into the world and into her possession almost immediately after that event. Now she told it clearly, concisely, not distractedly as in the night. She was a woman of few words, and always had been. Her prayers were short, morning and night. She could not have made them long.

"Adam came to my husband one day and said that Lucy Barlow was in trouble. She was expecting a baby. He implored Henry to take her up to Halifax on the *Lanigan*. She was the dearest, sweetest girl in all Gloucester, I will say that, laddie. Her father was the captain of a whaler and was away for many months out of the year. Her mother was dead, so Lucy spent most of her time with an uncle who lived here in Corinth. In the summer time she went to Gloucester to visit an aunt. But while she was here, we saw a great deal of her. She met Adam Carr at our house. He was already married, and he was very young — too young for the woman he was married to. He wasn't more than twenty-three or twenty-four and she was thirty-five. They were not happy together. Well, of course, he fell in love with Lucy. That's the long and the short of it.

"They just couldn't help themselves, it was that right and natural. Well, my husband asked me what we should do to help her, and I said at once that I would go up to Halifax with him on the next voyage and take Lucy along. Your father — I mean Adam

Carr, of course,— was boarding with us at the time. His wife lived in Gloucester. He persuaded Lucy to go with us, promising to come up as soon as he could arrange to do so. He was mate on his father's fishing schooner and couldn't get away at that time. It was his plan to get a divorce from his wife, but just how it was to be done I can't say. It never did happen, but it didn't matter in the end. She died a few years later. It's a God's pity she couldn't have died before Lucy had her trouble. We took Lucy away on the *Lanigan*. I was to stay with her through it all, and the *Lanigan* started back to Corinth. She went down with all on board just inside Eddy's Islands on the awful night you've heard — oh, but I can't speak of that! My husband was lost.

"I left Lucy there and came back here to wait for the sea to give up my dead. My own baby was coming. Ah, it was a dreadful, dreadful time, my laddie. Well, one day, four or five months after the wreck, Adam Carr came to me with a letter from Lucy. She wanted him to come to her at once. I went with him by steamer. We got there just before you were born. Lucy died the next day. Three weeks later my baby came,— a girl baby, and my only one. My little one died the day it was born, but Lucy's lived and thrived.

"It was then that Adam Carr suggested that I be mother to you, that you be known as Henry Payson's boy as long as you should live. He begged so hard and I wanted my own baby so much that I — well, I fell in with his plan. That is how you came into the world and how you became John Payson, son of Henry Payson, lost at sea months before you were born. I have tried to be a good mother to you, laddie, all these years, and now —"

He leaned over and kissed her, the tears streaming down his cheeks. She broke off in the middle of the lament to stroke his hand and murmur words of comfort.

Then, as if moved by a common impulse, they arose and stood together at the side of the man in the bed. He was staring straight up into their faces, and there was unmistakable intelligence in those bloodshot, bulging eyes. They drew back appalled. He knew! He had heard and he understood!

Suddenly John stepped forward and tenderly laid his hand on Adam Carr's forehead. He bent forward and said:

"It's all right, Father. It's all right."

Adam Carr's eyes closed slowly.

"The New York doctor will be here at two, and the nurse also," said the son, as much for the stricken man's benefit as for the Widow Payson.

The outer door was opened, and someone entered the parlour. An odd expression came into John Payson's face. His jaw fell; a look of utter dismay grew in his eyes.

"Why — why," he began blankly, "I don't believe I told Mary that you are not my mother. I didn't think. She must think that you — you are —"

Someone was rapping on the door casing not ten feet away, a gentle but imperative summons that cut short his wretched reflections.

"Who's there?" he called out in subdued tones.

"It is I," came back in Mary's voice. "I have come to see if I can help you and your mother."

He sprang forward and drew the curtains apart.

"Eric has telephoned from the Court-house that everything is well with him. So I came here as quickly as I could."

She came bravely into the room and looked at Adam Carr.

CHAPTER XXII

MR. COOPER'S BUSY DAY

It was by far the busiest day in the life of Mr. Joseph Cooper, editor. Do not overlook the fact that he was deprived of the right to publish the one great piece of news produced in Corinth and by Corinth some years prior to the prodigious doings of this day in April. At that time, you may remember, he got very drunk because he could not "print the news." On the present occasion he imbibed freely because he could print it. When you stop to consider that the Corinth *Courier* was made up largely of "plate matter" and "standing ads," and that Joseph was aided in the collection of sparse local news items by a youngster who could spell beautifully but had no definite idea when to do it, you may in a sense appreciate the magnitude of the task that confronted him. All in one day came three of the most startling "stories" Corinth had ever known. So all-absorbing were these items that a disastrous runaway on Main Street was completely overlooked by the bibulous scribe and his panic-stricken assistant, with the result that Mr. Peters, who had an arm broken in the tumble from his waggon, ordered his paper stopped because no mention was made of the "item." What was the sense, said he, of having your arm broken in the most thrilling runaway of the year if the fool reporters didn't put it in the paper? And he was right. What was the sense?

First of all, Joseph had the Hon. Horace Blagden's wonderful gift to the City to "write up." That, in itself, was enough to bring out all that was in him for one day. Just as he was comfortably well under way on the job,— and long before his first drink of the day, — came those staggering developments at the Courthouse. Before he could turn round, it seemed to him, the cry went up that Adam Carr, the celebrated detective, had been foully assassinated. From that time on Joseph did nothing but turn around; he fairly whirled. The cub reporter ran up and down-stairs so often that it got to be a habit with him, and he couldn't stop. Two amiable and resourceful tramp printers, loafing in the composing room, came to the rescue. They went out and gathered up the stray ends of the news, put them together, and set type so rapidly and at such length that Joseph never quite recovered from his surprise and gratification. They "lifted" ads without discrimination and substituted live "reading matter"; they "chopped out" columns of paid locals with a prodigality that cost Joseph as much as twenty dollars in "trade"; they got the news and they printed the news; they transformed the *Courier* into a sickening mass of typographical errors,— for no one was there to read proof on them,— but they turned out a "scarehead" journal that Corinth never quite got over talking about.

After it was all over, they drew their pay,— a staggering lot of ems they had set, by the way,— and proceeded to get luxuriously tight, landing in gaol before midnight. Which produced another sensation for the cub reporter the next day. There had not been a police court trial in a month. It was the cub reporter's practice to make long visits in the town hall daily, between trains, because it was cool there in the summer time and warm in the winter. Generally you could catch him napping there.

The leading editorial in the *Courier* on this memorable day was not written by Mr. Cooper. It was in the shape of a proclamation, and it was written and signed by Horace Blagden in his private room at the bank. It crowded out the magnificent editorial tribute devised by Joseph Cooper to reflect, in an anticipatory sort of way, the boundless gratitude of the people who were to be benefited by the princely gift of Mr. Blagden, "exclusive mention of which may be found in another column of this issue."

This signed statement of Horace Blagden was more remarkable than anything that had ever appeared in the *Courier*. It may be set forth here in few words, although it covered more than an entire column of the newspaper.

The father of Chetwynd Blagden took this means of announcing to the world that he held Eric Midthorne absolutely blameless!

Moreover, he went on to say that he considered the taking off of his son to be the act of a just, all-wise Providence, "whose ways, though strange and inscrutable, bring pain only to him who seeks to dispute them." He declared, in no half-hearted terms, that he would stand at his unhappy nephew's side during the trial that was to come, not as prosecutor but as defender, and that through him, the father, the spirit of Chetwynd Blagden would rise to proclaim the innocence of the self-accused. It was his prayer that the case might be brought to trial without delay, and that justice might be appeased in the speedy acquittal of "my beloved nephew, Eric Midthorne."

The name of Adam Carr was not mentioned.

In another column, however, appeared the news of Mr. Carr's illness. The one great feature of the story was missing, however, for the simple reason that it did not come to light.

Mary Midthorne prevailed. She was at the Payson cottage when the polite printer appeared, in eager pursuit of the news. If he was disappointed to learn that there had been no assassination, he was careful to conceal the fact. In truth, he admitted cheerfully that he was "blamed glad of it," they were so hard pressed for time and room up at the *Courier* office. Mary kept John Payson from revealing more of the truth than was necessary concerning Adam Carr. The perspiring printer went away directly, in possession of everything except the sensation involved.

"Why should you tell it to the world?" argued Mary, confronting Payson and his foster-mother in the kitchen, whither they had fled leaving the unsuspecting doctor to tell what he knew to the interviewer. "He doesn't acknowledge you as his son, why should you say he is your father? Just four people know the truth, John. It has been a secret held by two people for more than thirty years. Why can't we keep it to the very end? Just you and I and Mrs. Payson. *He* will never speak."

Payson agreed to this, with the single provision that in due time Eric should be told.

A week passed. In that period, Corinth came to appreciate the unfaltering growth of two conditions, not unlike in character, but entirely foreign to each other. In one instance it was the devoted loyalty of Joan Bright to Eric Midthorne; in the other, the surprising devotion of Mary Midthorne to the sick man in the Widow Payson's cottage. There was no speculation as to the attitude of Miss Bright, but in some quarters wonder was expressed over Mary's behaviour. Corinth, in ignorance of the real situation, found some difficulty in satisfying itself as to an imaginary one. Of course, it was known that Mary and John were in love with each other, but that was no reason why she should devote so much of her time to Adam Carr, outsider. The man could not be moved, but as there were two nurses in the house to attend to him, with doctors making daily visits, it was not reasonable to suppose that Mrs. Payson depended on Mary for assistance. Moreover, Corinth was still unable to make out whether Adam was friendly to Mary's brother. In any event, he was distinctly at odds with Horace Blagden, which was something.

Before the end of the week, Adam Carr recovered the power of speech. He was hopelessly paralysed from the waist down. At first he spoke with an effort, but his indomitable will-power overcame the impediment; he articulated slowly but clearly. His mind was clear and active. He required the truth of the doctors. Getting it, he philosophised:

"There's no sense in your waiting around here, Jack. I may hang on for ten years. Doctors can't tell anything about it, but I'm such a tenacious individual that it's not likely that I'll give up the ghost without a long fight. Of course, I ought to be sensible and quit right now. Better for you, better for me, better for Mrs. Payson, better for everybody, if I could pass on tonight, but I guess it won't be so easy as that. Nothing has ever been real easy for me. Even this won't be easy. If I were you, I'd get back to New York and business. I'll be lying here if you can find the time week ends, to come and see your mother and Mary. I don't mind it so much, after all. A long rest will do me good. As you won't hear to me being removed to a hospital, and your mother won't either, I guess I'll have to stay where I'm put. In a week or two I can be wheeled about in a chair, so it won't be so bad. Now, listen to what I've got to say; get it firmly in your mind. So far as the world is concerned, I am never to be anything more to you than Mr. Adam. That's what I've been for thirty years. I've never said I was anything else. I never will, not even to you. It won't hurt the world any to keep on thinking your daddy is out there in the Atlantic, and that your mother is here instead of up there in the little graveyard at Gloucester. Horace Blagden, much as he'd like to, can't rake either of them up. He only suspects half the truth. He doesn't know about poor Lucy Barlow. Your mother here won't mind being mother to you, right or wrong, till she dies. So just you go on thinking of me as Mr. Adam, your best friend, and I'll keep on being your best friend. All the King's horses and all the King's men can't drag it out of me. When it comes time for me to die, and I know it, I may ask you to put your ear close to my lips so that I can whisper it to you, but it won't be till then, and it won't be for anybody else's ear. There's only one other person that must be told. Eric's got to know it before you make Mary your wife."

"But I'm not going to make her my wife," said his son gently but firmly.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Adam decisively. "There's no way 'round that. I'm not as good as Philip Midthorne was, but Lucy Barlow was as good as most of the Blagdens. Don't forget that, my lad. Ask your mother. She knew her."

"Ask my mother!" repeated John Payson, with a bitter smile.

"I didn't mean it to sound funny, Jack," said Adam humbly.

A day or two later, old Jabez hobbled up to see his son. He stood at the bedside, peering quizzically at the occupant, on whose lips there was a distorted grin of welcome.

"Well, Father, how are you?"

"Just so-so, Adam," replied the ancient.

"Rheumatism any better?"

"Some."

There was a period of silent regard. Then old Jabez found the words he wanted.

"It's a blamed shame, Adam. I don't see why the good Lord didn't do this to me, 'stead of you. It wouldn't ha' made any difference if it had been me, but — but it don't seem right for you to be lyin' here like this an' me skippin' about as spry as ever. It don't seem right."

"Nonsense," said Adam, cheerfully. "How old are you, Father?"

"Eighty odd last January. Dang it, you ain't even sixty. That's why it's wrong."

"No," said Adam, "your eighty odd years proves it to be right. Nature makes us pay as we go. You haven't any scores to settle with Nature. That's why you're eighty odd and spry. And, now, how are the squirrels?"

"Well, sir," said Jabez, sitting down in the chair that had been placed for him, "they're gettin' so blamed fresh that there ain't no livin' with 'em. The whole caboodle of 'em got in the house yesterday when I was takin' a nap, and, dang me, if they didn't find that barril of peanuts you sent down last month. When I woke up, by gosh, I couldn't hardly get out of the door fer peanut shells. Fust I thought there'd been a sudden snowstorm, but they cracked so loud when I stepped on 'em I knowed it couldn't be that. Then I got to the door and see them fool critters settin' around on the grass out there in front, so cussed fat that I thought they'd bust. They jest couldn't wobble. You never in all your life, Adam, see such idiotic lookin' things as they wuz. A hundred of 'em! Squattin' around the place, kinder pitiful like. Cussin' them didn't do no good. They jest looked back and twigged their tails feeble the more I cussed. And you can't give a squirrel paregoric like you can a baby."

And now you have an idea of what Nature had begun to do for Jabez Carr.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Adam Carr did not recover his speech until after the brief, perfunctory trial of Eric Midthorne was over and the young man stood honourably acquitted. The defendant's story was not even assailed by the commonwealth. There was no voice to dispute his claim of self-defence, no witness to cast the remotest doubt upon the statement he made. The only human being who might have spoken for or against him, was powerless to utter an intelligible sound.

When John Payson entered the sick-room and calmly announced to his mother that the jury had discharged Eric without leaving the box, and on the advice of the

Court himself, Adam Carr opened his eyes and spoke aloud for the first time since he was stricken the week before.

"I knew they would," he said with an effort, but quite distinctly, to the great amazement of the doctor and the nurse. The Widow Payson and John were not surprised. They understood the inscrutable ways of the man.

The machinery of the law never worked so fast as in the case of the State vs. Eric Midthorne. Five days after he surrendered himself to the sheriff, his case was called for hearing. The court-room was crowded, for the *Courier* had announced the trial day and hour. No one was there in the hope of finding fresh sensations, but to hear the story of the fight from the lips of the victor himself.

Inside the railing sat the entire bar of the city. Judge Oswald Bright came over from the Capital and occupied a seat on the bench beside the Court. His daughter sat with Mary Midthorne at the defendant's table. Horace Blagden and his wife had seats so close to Eric that they could lean forward and whisper in his ear, an oft-repeated act which sent a thrill of approbation through the big audience, and had a moral though utterly wasted effect on the jury.

The preliminaries were brief. Mr. State's Attorney Collins read the affidavit on information and belief and called his only witness — the sheriff of the county, who merely testified that the prisoner at the bar was the man mentioned in the instrument and that he had openly confessed to the slaying of Chetwynd Blagden. The state rested. The audience leaned back with an audible breath of relief.

The defence very naturally moved to quash the indictment on the ground that the *corpus delicti* had not been established, but formally withdrew the motion a moment later, as a part of the programme, to permit Eric Midthorne to tell his story on the stand. The audience listened with breathless interest to the recital, dividing its attention between the young man in the box and the grey haired parents of Chetwynd Blagden, watching with eager eyes for some sign of animosity on their part. If the people expected or hoped for a demonstration they were disappointed. The Blagdens sat very still and erect, their pinched backs to the multitude, their heads twisted slightly toward the witness, from whose face their gaze was not once removed during the uninterrupted recital. At its conclusion they turned expectantly toward the state's attorney.

"No questions, your honour," announced that officer of the commonwealth.

Horace Blagden's figure straightened perceptibly. A moment later his own name was called. He arose slowly, — at any other time we would have said pompously,— and slipped into the witness box. A stir swept through the crowd. Here was a sensation, after all.

Facing the judge, the great man of Corinth took the oath, his right hand uplifted. It did not tremble. He then testified to the reputation of the defendant for truth and veracity, and to his standing in the community. That was all. He gave it clearly, unfalteringly. He was not asked if he were the father of the deceased. It was as the first citizen of Corinth that he testified. One could have been excused for smiling at the theatric display of self-regard that overshadowed the real intention of the man. The great man of Corinth was speaking. No one could have asked for more than that.

Horace Blagden did not mean to place himself in a false position. He was intensely sincere in his desire to dissipate all doubt in the minds of the townspeople as to his attitude toward his nephew. No more convincing way could have presented itself, he argued, than this opportunity to publicly repeat the sentiment embodied in his earlier newspaper expression. Adam Carr, when he heard of the act, uttered an opinion that no one else dared to voice.

"Old Horace simply can't help it. It's born in him. When he dies, by the grace of God, he'll lie in state. And no matter how dead he is, he'll know he's lying in state."

The judge instructed the jury to find for the defendant, and Eric was discharged from custody almost before you could have counted twelve.

The whole affair was so palpably predestined that it savoured of travesty, and yet there was a seriousness about it all that could not be mistaken. The law itself did not come in for much consideration. So far as the real legal aspects of the case were concerned, all precedents were violated. But no one cared about that. Not a single soul in all Corinth desired the punishment of Eric Midthorne. Corinth, therefore, was the law.

Eric's trial was much the same as a wedding or a funeral: a matter of a few very important minutes and then everybody going about his own business as if it hadn't occurred. The wedding means a great deal to the fellow who is getting married, and the funeral is of the utmost importance to the chap who is being buried, but the world does not care a scrap what happens to either of them after it is all over. Most of us get married, and all of us die. People come and see us do both, if the opportunity presents itself, and go away thoroughly satisfied that it is the end of the matter so far as they are concerned.

Corinth would have stepped up and congratulated Eric on his acquittal if it could have done so with propriety. But there had been ample time for reflection. The magnanimous Blagdens were to be considered. How would it appear to them if everyone rushed up to shake hands with the destroyer of their only son? Dreadful! So Corinth, or as much of it as could be crowded into the court-room, considerately effaced itself as soon as the verdict was given.

While the crowd was leaving the court-room, the judge on the bench calmly turned to the clerk and said:

"Call the next case, Mr. Clerk."

The regular panel remained in the jury box; the sheriff went over to the telephone and called up the gaol; and half an hour later a dissolute sailor from the water front was on trial for stealing a pound of tobacco, and the state's attorney was working his head off, so to speak, to secure the maximum penalty. One has to make an example of such chaps, you see. Society demands it.

. . . .

The Rev. Mr. Presbrey alone came forward to congratulate Eric, regardless of the presence of the Blagdens or the fitness of the occasion. With tears in his eyes, he wrung the embarrassed young man's hand with a vigour that suggested something long pent-up and thriving.

"Thank you, Mr. Presbrey," muttered Eric, very uncomfortable.

"We've been praying for you, Eric," said Mr. Presbrey; "Mrs. Presbrey and I. Ah, my dear young friend, you do not know how greatly this will please my wife, your most devoted friend. She is indisposed to-day. Otherwise she would have accompanied me here. But her heart is here, her thoughts are here."

"Good morning, Arthur," said Horace Blagden pleasantly. "I am sorry to hear that Julia is ill. Nothing serious, I hope."

Mr. Presbrey's eyes flew wide open. He stared for a moment. Then his face turned a deep pink.

"Not at all, not at all," he stammered, completely taken aback. "Merely a cold, Mr. Blagden. In the head."

"Please remember us to her," said Mr. Blagden, slipping his arm through Eric's. "Oh, by-the-by, Arthur," he went on after an instant's reflection, "will it be convenient for you to drop in to see me at the bank to-morrow? Any hour will do. I want to talk over a question in connexion with the new library."

Mr. Presbrey stiffened. "I have read something about it," he said.

"Do you think Julia will be well enough to come to dinner to-morrow evening?" asked Mrs. Blagden. "Then you two could have the whole evening to yourselves in the library."

"Good!" said her husband genially. "And we could have the architect there to assist us. What do you say, Presbrey?"

Mr. Presbrey's face was a study.

"I — I — dear me, dear me!" he faltered, nervously fumbling for his handkerchief. Finding it, he blew his nose rather aimlessly and then repeated: "Dear me!" They were waiting for an answer. He cleared his throat. "Really, I — I — yes, yes, it's very good of you, I am sure. Dear me! Of course, you understand, it is only a cold in the head. I fancy she will be quite rid of it by to-morrow. Mustard foot bath to-night. Yes, yes! Hot mustard for a cold head — cold in the head, I should say. Dear me! It will seem quite like old times, my dear friends."

Horace was enjoying himself. Afterwards he confessed to a certain meanness of spirit, a delicious sensation of malice; but quite pardonable, he argued, in view of the fact that he was returning good for evil. Eric, the only other witness beside Mrs. Blagden, actually felt sorry for the distressed ex-minister.

"Except that we all have grown older and wiser," supplemented Mr. Blagden.

Mr. Presbrey made haste to accept the amendment. "And better, I hope," he said. He did not know it, but that was a master-stroke. As a matter of fact, in repeating the amazing conversation to his wife, he quite forgot to mention the remark.

"We dine at seven, Mr. Presbrey," said Mrs. Blagden.

He responded bravely. "Instead of six-thirty?"

Ah! Here was tribute to the memory of old times!

"I shall also ask Mr. King to come in," said Horace, in the most matter-of-fact way.

Mr. Presbrey drew a long breath. "I shall rejoice in the opportunity to meet him," he said desperately. "You said six-thirty?"

"Seven," said Horace. Then, as if recognising an oversight, he extended his hand. Mr. Presbrey was on the point of blowing his nose again. He hastily switched the handkerchief to his left hand, and clasped the ends of Mr. Blagden's fingers in his right. It was not much of a hand-shake, but it seemed to put new life into him. At least, he breathed with less difficulty.

He went home to Julia in a perfect maze of bewilderment. She not only took a mustard foot bath externally but nine grains of quinine the other way.

In the corridor of the Court-house, Eric, walking between his uncle and aunt with his arms through theirs, burst out feelingly:

"Uncle Horace, you are wonderful, really wonderful."

Mr. Blagden smiled, self-satisfied. "Paying off all the old scores, Eric," he said gravely.

A little group was waiting for them at the top of the stairway. John Payson quietly detached himself from the rest and started down-stairs as they approached.

"Just a moment, John, if you please," said Mr. Blagden, raising his voice slightly. "This is a day for renewing old acquaintances, old friendships. Will you shake hands, sir?"

Payson did not hesitate. He clasped the banker's hand.

"Certainly, sir. Is this your verdict?"

Mr. Blagden was puzzled. He looked into the young man's steady eyes for a moment; then the doubt was lifted from his own.

"It is," he said succinctly, and Payson knew that at last he was acquitted of complicity in the bank defalcation. An instant later Horace remarked: "I am a just man. By-the-by," he went on, "how is Adam Carr to-day?"

"There is no change. Mr. Blagden, I am sorry to say. He will never speak again, sir."

Then Horace Blagden uttered a remarkable prophecy.

"I know him well. He will speak in his own good time. A strange, unaccountable man, John. A secret man. I have been thinking of him in the last few days, thinking a great deal. Perhaps you will not mind saying to him that I have expressed a desire to come and see him some day. He will hear you."

He left Payson standing there, staring after him with a look of wonder in his eyes.

. . . .

Joan Bright went up to the grey house on the hill with the two Midthornes. In the dim old library she abruptly faced Eric, holding out her hands to him. There were tears of utter joy and gladness in her eyes.

"Eric," she said softly, "I truly believe I am the only one who has not changed. I am still just what I was in the beginning."

He lifted her hands to his lips. "Love does not change," he said, a deep thrill in his voice. "It goes on just the same until it is killed, but it does not change while it is alive. Love is life, that is the secret of it. Ah, it is good to be alive, after all. Yesterday I could have died. To-day I shudder at the thought of it. I love to-day because you are the very heart of it, you are the life of it. It throbs with you, Joan darling. To-day I love life because I love you."

"And because I love you," she added.

Mary was a silent, enchanted listener. Her eyes glowed with the deep, mysterious light, her lips moved with their lips.

She waited until he took Joan in his arms. Then she stole quietly from the room. They did not hear, they did not see. They had forgotten her. She went upstairs and took up the portrait of a man from her dressing table. She kissed it and held it tight to her breast, and was no longer lonely.

At last Joan remembered. With a quick start of confusion she released herself from Eric's arms, and turned a burning face, expecting to meet the smile of the girl who had come into the library with them.

"Oh, I wonder —" she began, after a searching glance about the room which revealed no living witness to the ancient encounter.

She straightened her hat. "What a dear, dear girl she is!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CUP IS FULL

Jabez Carr sat outside his cottage on a warm spring afternoon a fortnight after the trial of Eric Midthorne. There had been six funerals at the Seaman's Home during the past two days, and Jabez was reflective. Something certainly was wrong at headquarters. He could not understand why the grim reaper had been allowed such privileges. Gross neglect on somebody's part; that was quite clear. Six in two days! Why, said he to himself, it must have been downright criminal carelessness on the part of the confounded ship's surgeon, letting able-bodied, healthy people die like that. Not one of them was a day over seventy-five, he calculated,—not a single one of them. There had been no epidemic that he was aware of,—no cholera, no small-pox, no anything that you could put your finger on. Then, what the dickens did they mean down there, letting people die before their time? There ought to be an investigation, a very rigid one, said Jabez firmly. Come to think of it, Jack Beason, bo's'n, was nigh onto eighty, but he was as spry as a rabbit the last time he came up to the gate. What business had he to be dying?

Somehow, without really giving a thought to it, the ancient gate-keeper sought out the only spot where the sunshine struck brightly through the tree-tops, and there he placed his stool. It occurred to him that the warm sun was unusually grateful to his bones. No doubt, it was the gloom of those six funerals that had got into his marrow, but there was no getting around the fact that the sunshine had a most pleasing effect.

The sun's rays struck the corner of the cottage where the rain-barrel stood. So it was there that he put his stool. With rare inconsistency he leaned his back against the damp staves of the barrel, and smoked his pipe in blissful contempt of the rheumatism and other ills that lay behind him. Sunshine! No one ever came to grief by getting too much sunshine; that is, if one didn't overdo it. The days seemed shorter than they used to be anyway, thought Jabez. You could get up at sunrise, attend to a few things here and there, and the first thing you knew the sun was setting. And the nights, too, seemed shorter of late. Better get what little sunshine there was, said he.

But six in two days! Yes, sir, there was something radically wrong somewhere. He sat up suddenly, confronted by an uncanny question: would there be more funerals on the morrow?

The squirrels frisked about him unnoticed. They sat up on their tails and waited with admirable patience for him to hurl sticks at them. They listened for the mild epithets with which he hectored them.

But he puffed on at his cold pipe, and his thoughts were far away.

A strong voice called out a greeting to him. He awoke from his long reverie with a start. The sun had moved away from the rain-barrel and gleamed warm against the cottage wall, a dozen paces to the left.

Four young people were standing before him. He rubbed his eyes, blinked, and then shook the tobacco from his pipe.

"What day is this?" he asked hazily, coming to his feet.

"Sunday, Uncle Jabe," said Eric.

He looked relieved. "There won't be any to-day," he said. "They never have 'em on Sundays." With which, the thought of funerals passed away. His face brightened. The jolly twinkle returned into his eyes. A vast politeness seized him.

"Glad to see you, glad to see you," he exclaimed. "Here, Eric, and you, Jack, trundle out them rockers for the young ladies. Be spry about it. Scat! You little divils!" This to the joyous squirrels. "I'm uncommon pleased to see you, Miss Joan. It's a great honour." He carefully wiped his hand on his trousers leg, and extended it to meet hers. He then shook hands with Mary, going farther, however, to pat the little fingers with his free hand, a feat which compelled him to restore the pipe to his lips, where it wobbled uncertainly, deprived of its usual support. "Someone has been tellin' me of the weddings that is to be. For the life of me, I can't tell who it was."

"It was I, Uncle Jabe," said Eric, coming up with one of the chairs.

"So it was," said Jabez, visibly relieved. "I'm gettin' so danged forgetful. Well, Jack, how is Adam today?"

"Very comfortable," said Payson. "He sends his love to you."

"Fine boy, Adam is,— a wonderful boy," mused the ancient. "Set down, gir — young ladies. Git out o' this, dang ye!" He clapped his hands vigorously upon his legs and several audacious quadrupeds scuttled off in amazement but not in fear. "Double weddings is good luck, powerful good luck," he went on, drawing up his stool. "Except in one case I remember of. That was when Dick Fink, as fine a chap as ever lived, had a double wedding all of his own. He got married twice in one week to different gals in different ports. Well, sir, when them two gals found out what he'd been up to, they turned in and got him put in gaol an' made life so miserable for him that he was glad to go to the penitentiary for five years. When did you leave New York, Jack?"

"Yesterday."

"I suppose she's all there? I must go down an' have a look at her one o' these days. I ain't been to New York since the war, forty odd year ago. Let's see, Eric, you said June, didn't you?"

"The tenth of June, at Uncle Horace's house. You will come to see us married, of course?"

Mr. Carr looked dubious. "If I can get someone to tend gate for me. I don't know as I can get anyone, though. Maybe there won't be anyone left by that time. What's this I hear about old Presbrey being made boss of the new library? That's all wrong. It hadn't ought to be. That's just plain cussed interference by Horace Blagden. This here new preacher, Mr. King, is the right man for the place. He's a splendid feller. I had no idee a preacher could be such a gentleman. See this here new pipe? Well, sir, he brought it down to me last week with a dozen packages o' Yale mixture. Says he, it ain't wrong to smoke, any more'n it is to eat. By ginger, I don't see what's come over the church these days. Old Presbrey used to say I'd go to hell if I smoked. I told him onct I'd sooner be in hell smokin' than in heaven not doin' it. No, sir! A man o' them narrow idees ain't got no business runnin' a public library. He'll make a terrible mess of it, he will. Why, how can a feller read without a pipe in his mouth? It's —" Words failed him. He waved his hands to complete the opinion.

Four very happy young people laughed aloud, greatly to his dismay. He mumbled an apology and got up to shoo the squirrels away.

"Next time that little cuss comes pesterin' around you, Miss Joan, hit him a good one side the head," he remarked gruffly.

"I wouldn't strike it for the world," cried Joan.

"You'd better not," said Jabez sharply, before he could think.

His subsequent humility was wonderful to behold.

"Can you guess, Uncle Jabe," began Eric, "what we'd all like, most of anything in the world?"

His eyes twinkled. "Yes, sir, I *do* know," said he with a fine wink. The girls blushed.

"We've come to spend the afternoon listening to those good old stories of yours," said Eric hastily. "That's what we want. Joan has never heard you tell stories."

"I want to hear the very best you have in that wonderful head of yours, Uncle Jabe," said Joan.

"I like the one about the pirate —" began Mary eagerly.

But Jabez shook his head.

"They was all lies,— terrible, ungodly lies," he said, very solemnly. "It's wrong to tell 'em."

"We know they are lies," cried Mary. "That is always understood at the beginning, and that's why we love them so dearly."

"No, sir," said Jabez firmly. "I can't do it. It ain't right. Mr. King has been talkin' to me about rectitude and honour in old age. He says it's wrong to lie, 'specially at my time o' life. So I guess I'll have to disappoint you."

They were disappointed. "Just one or two, Uncle

Jabe," pleaded Joan. "We'll never ask it of you again. Two or three whoppers won't hurt, I am sure, if we know they —"

"Can't do it, Miss Joan," said he stubbornly, but with an effort to subdue the wistful look in his old eyes. "Nothing would please me better. I'd love to do it. But it ain't right, as Mr. King says. I got to go by what he says."

Eric assumed an air of severity. "Do you mean to say that the church has been meddling with your affairs?"

"Meddling?" gasped Jabez.

"Yes, sir, meddling."

"Go long with you, Eric," exclaimed Jabez helplessly. "Lies is lies."

"And Mr. King has put the hand of bigotry on your life?" in fine scorn.

"What's that?" demanded Jabez, bristling.

"Don't tease, Eric," interposed Joan.

"The church has a great deal to answer for," insisted Midthorne. "Meddling like this with a man's business."

"Business?" murmured Jabez. "Whose business?"

"Isn't it your business to make people happy?"

"Well, I guess it's Mr. King's business, too," said he resignedly. "He comes down here and tells me the truth about things and I see things in a new way from what I used to. Old Presbrey stretched the truth so that it looked mighty fishy to me. Mr. King puts it in a nutshell. If he says it's wrong to lie, why it is, that's all. Dang it all," he exploded virtuously, "I never see a pirate in my life. Nor a handsome princess either."

John Payson spoke, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Do you believe that everything in the bible is true, Uncle Jabe?"

Jabez glared at him. "I'll believe it all until some of you smart Alecks prove it ain't true. I used to laugh at that tale about Jonar and the whale. Mr. King says it's paregorical. I told him nobody could make me believe a feller could live inside a whale's belly,—bible er no bible. He said he didn't believe it either. It's just a paryble."

"They are joking with you, Uncle Jabe," said Mary, coming to his rescue.

"Of course, we are," cried Eric warmly. "We will not ask you to tell us any more lies. Mr. King is right. But you surely can't object to telling us a few true stories."

Jabez Carr pondered. "Well," he said at last and with conviction, "a story ain't wuth tellin' unless it's a lie." Then, to change the subject, which was more dangerous than he cared to admit: "When do you start work on Judge Bright's new house, Eric?"

And so, instead of being entertained by him on this Sunday afternoon, they were content and eager to discuss their own intimate affairs for his especial benefit, thereby doing much toward the support of Mr. King's missionary efforts and at the same time adding considerable to their own estimate of what heaven really is.

Jabez succeeded in grasping a few of the more important details; a thousand trivial points escaped him. By dint of arduous questioning, he gathered that the ground was to be broken next week for the Bright mansion; that the plans for the great public library were well under way; that Jack and Mary were to live in New York City; that Eric and Joan were to make Corinth their home for a few years, at least; that the Widow

Payson would not hear to Adam's removal to a sanitorium in the Adirondacks; that Mr. Presbrey and Mr. King were bosom friends; that the former was prayer leader in the reconstructed First Church, and very sure about it; that Mr. Blagden was a greater man than ever before; that Mrs. Blagden was an angel; that Corinth would be put on the map to stay; that the world was a very wonderful abiding place, after all.

One secret remained untold. He was never to know that one of the tall young men who sat there glibly talking was his own grand-son.

He walked with them to the gate when the dusk of night began to fall. It had been a great afternoon for him, but a distressingly short one. Yes, they seemed to be growing shorter all the time. He leaned on the bars and watched them until they were out of sight among the trees.

"Funny thing," he mused, "but I can't remember being so keen about things when I was their age. Times must have changed a whole lot. Still, I wonder. It was a long while ago. I guess a young feller is a young feller, no matter where you put him."

Then he went back, clucking to the squirrels.

. . . .

Adam Carr, propped up in his wheel chair, eyed a dark and threatening sky from the tiny lawn in front of the Widow Payson's house in Handy Street. There was an alertness in his eyes that contrasted sharply with the inertness of his body, which sagged in the depths of the chair. Late afternoon winds came gently up from the sea, bringing coolness to relieve the heat of this blistering day in May.

Passers-by bespoke him from the sidewalk, along which they hurried in advance of the approaching storm.

"Riding at anchor in a safe cove," said Adam to himself and of himself.

Mrs. Payson came to the porch.

"I think we'd better have the nurse get you into the house, Adam," she said.

He looked wistfully at the sky. "I'd like to have a good drenching," he said to her. "It can't hurt me."

"Nonsense," she said. "Don't be silly." She went into the house to call the nurse.

He grumbled. "A little rain won't spoil me. You'd think I was a lump of sugar instead of clay."

The nurse and Mrs. Payson lifted the chair to the tiny front porch.

"I'll stay out here, if you please," said he, "until it really begins to rain. I like the rush of the wind. Don't worry. I won't blow away. I'm anchored, safe enough."

They left him to wait for the sweep of the storm. Who can tell of the thoughts, the bitter conflict of thoughts, that ran through the keen, active brain of this wonderful man as he sat there glowering at a sky no blacker than his mood?

There was life in the wind that swept his grim, expressionless face; there was strength in the way it came up to smite him, to caress him, to tantalise him. He opened his mouth and drank it in, and held his breath as if to keep it captive. His eyes shone with the love of it, with the hatred of it. He loved it because it was life; he hated it because it was dead when it left his lungs to go oozing out into the world again. And he knew it would come to life the instant it left him. He hated a dead thing. He hated his own body. He loved the wind because it could live and die in the same breath, and live on forever.

He found himself wondering, at last, if there was a soul within him that lived and died, and lived and died, and went on living as the wind lived, without end through all time,— always and forever. It was a strange thought to him. He liked it. What was the wind but the rush of countless souls that came and went with each succeeding breath? The wind would never die. It would cease one day to visit his useless hulk, but it would go on forever just the same, carrying the last breath of him with it — the last bit of the soul of him. He liked the thought of it. There was something in it, after all. Life went on with the wind; death stayed behind to rot. The wind would never die. Yes, that was what they meant when they said the soul would never die. How could it die?

In that short space of time, as the storm came up, Adam Carr began to grasp the elusive thing men call religion. He was not taking it on faith. He was beginning to reason it out.

The first scattering drops of rain blew across his face. Someone moved behind him. He looked up. The nurse was at the head of his chair, smiling.

" It's coming," she said.

" Coming and going," he said, with a smile she did not understand, it was so mysterious.

Even as the door closed upon the gathering storm, a man hurried up from the sidewalk and lifted the knocker.

Mrs. Payson admitted him. A tall, frail man whose hair was white.

" I've come, Adam, to see if we cannot be friends after all these bitter years," said Horace Blagden, stopping still at the foot of the chair.

Adam caught his breath. He was speechless for many seconds; long, tense seconds they were. When words came, it was the old Adam Carr who uttered them.

"Horace," he said, slowly, deliberately, "it won't seem natural not to hate you."

"I understand," said Mr. Blagden. "It has not been easy for me, Adam."

Adam Carr addressed the wondering nurse.

"Miss Hastings, will you be good enough to take Mr. Blagden's hat and to push my chair over by the window? And then you may leave us for awhile. I beg your pardon. This is Mr. Horace Blagden, the great man of Corinth."

Mr. Blagden did not wince. If there was a tinge of irony in the characterisation, it escaped him. He bowed graciously to the young woman and seated himself where he could look into the face of the man who had just made the admission — the one man in all Corinth to begrudge him the distinction up to the present hour. Ah, it *was* something to get that out of Adam Carr! Now it was complete. His cup of satisfaction was full.

STORIES OF RARE CHARM BY
GENE STRATTON-PORTER

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset and Dunlap's list

LADDIE.

Illustrated by Herman Pfeifer.

This is a bright, cheery tale with the scenes laid in Indiana. The story is told by Little Sister, the youngest member of a large family, but it is concerned not so much with childish doings as with the love affairs of older members of the family. Chief among them is that of Laddie, the older brother whom Little Sister adores, and the Princess, an English girl who has come to live in the neighborhood and about whose family there hangs a mystery. There is a wedding midway in the book and a double wedding at the close.

THE HARVESTER. Illustrated by W. L. Jacobs.

"The Harvester," David Langston, is a man of the woods and fields, who draws his living from the prodigal hand of Mother Nature herself. If the book had nothing in it but the splendid figure of this man it would be notable. But when the Girl comes to his "Medicine Woods," and the Harvester's whole being realizes that this is the highest point of life which has come to him—there begins a romance of the rarest idyllic quality.

FRECKLES. Decorations by E. Stetson Crawford.

Freckles is a nameless waif when the tale opens, but the way in which he takes hold of life; the nature friendships he forms in the great Limberlost Swamp; the manner in which everyone who meets him succumbs to the charm of his engaging personality; and his love-story with "The Angel" are full of real sentiment.

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST.

Illustrated by Wladyslaw T. Brenda.

The story of a girl of the Michigan woods; a buoyant, lovable type of the self-reliant American. Her philosophy is one of love and kindness towards all things; her hope is never dimmed. And by the sheer beauty of her soul, and the purity of her vision, she wins from barren and unpromising surroundings those rewards of high courage.

AT THE FOOT OF THE RAINBOW.

Illustrations in colors by Oliver Kemp.

The scene of this charming love story is laid in Central Indiana. The story is one of devoted friendship, and tender self-sacrificing love. The novel is brimful of the most beautiful word painting of nature, and its pathos and tender sentiment will endear it to all.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

ZANE GREY'S NOVELS

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list

THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS

Colored frontispiece by W. Herbert Dunton.

Most of the action of this story takes place near the turbulent Mexican border of the present day. A New York society girl buys a ranch which becomes the center of frontier warfare. Her loyal cowboys defend her property from bandits, and her superintendent rescues her when she is captured by them. A surprising climax brings the story to a delightful close.

DESERT GOLD

Illustrated by Douglas Duer.

Another fascinating story of the Mexican border. Two men, lost in the desert, discover gold when, overcome by weakness, they can go no farther. The rest of the story describes the recent uprising along the border, and ends with the finding of the gold which the two prospectors had willed to the girl who is the story's heroine.

RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

Illustrated by Douglas Duer.

A picturesque romance of Utah of some forty years ago when Mormon authority ruled. In the persecution of Jane Withersteen, a rich ranch owner, we are permitted to see the methods employed by the invisible hand of the Mormon Church to break her will.

THE LAST OF THE PLAINSMEN

Illustrated with photograph reproductions.

This is the record of a trip which the author took with Buffalo Jones, known as the preserver of the American bison, across the Arizona desert and of a hunt in "that wonderful country of yellow crags, deep canons and giant pines." It is a fascinating story.

THE HERITAGE OF THE DESERT

Jacket in color. Frontispiece.

This big human drama is played in the Painted Desert. A lovely girl, who has been reared among Mormons, learns to love a young New Englander. The Mormon religion, however, demands that the girl shall become the second wife of one of the Mormons—

Well, that's the problem of this sensational, big selling story.

BETTY ZANE

Illustrated by Louis F. Grant.

This story tells of the bravery and heroism of Betty, the beautiful young sister of old Colonel Zane, one of the bravest pioneers. Life along the frontier, attacks by Indians, Betty's heroic defense of the beleaguered garrison at Wheeling, the burning of the Fort, and Betty's final race for life, make up this never-to-be-forgotten story.

GROSSET & DUNLAP, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

LIBRARY
MAY
19
1982
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY